The Mistress of Windfells

By

A. M. GWYNNE

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THE MISTRESS OF WINDFELLS

A Novel By

A. M. GWYNNE.

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INDEX

Chap.		Page
1	Introducing Joan	1
2	An Interview and What came of it	11
3	The Woolshed's Guardian	22
4	The Incendiary	28
5	Joan's Lover	34
6	The Prodigal's Return	40
7	The New Uncle	47
8	On Tottie's Birthday	53
9	A Picnic	61
10	The Birthday Cake	70
11	Miss Homfrey's Discovery	74
12	Nell's Confession	80
13	A Second Chance	88
14	An Unsuccessful Wooing	96
15	A Warning	107
16	Bush Fire	118
17	Holidays by the Sea	129
18	Proves Bertie a Hero	138
19	Miss Homfrey does some Thinking	144
20	A Hundred Pounds Reward	150
21	The New Manager	160
22	On Stephen's Recommendation	165
23	Back at Windfells...	172
24	Golden Months	181
25	Hansen's Re-appesrance	190
26	A Confession	197
27	The Blow Falls	205
28	Dark Clouds Overhead	217
29	The Departure of Miss Homfrey	221
30	A Time of Waiting	230
31	An Evening of Enchantment	240
32	Tom Rawlins' Letter	246

1531002

CHAPTER I.

Introduces Joan.

It was towards evening on a Spring day in the early years of the present century that Joan Fetherston stepped through the open French window of her sitting-room on to the verandah. From here she could command an uninterrupted view of the road that led up from the township. It was along this road that Tom Rawlins, the station manager, and Joan's trusted adviser in all business connected with Windfells, must come on his way home with the tri-weekly mail.

The hint of a frown clouded her brow, speaking of impatience. She was feeling something akin to vexation that he dawdled away his time down in the township rather than hasten back to her. He had no doubt met friends with whom he wished to chat, but to-day he might have denied himself that pleasure knowing how anxious she was for his return.

Joan paced the long low-roofed verandah with restless steps, glancing every few moments at the little collection of wooden buildings which formed the township from which the station took its name.

Miss Fetherston was tall and fair and comely, with hair of ruddy gold that shone like burnished copper in the bright sunlight. Fearless blue eyes, calling to mind the azure tint of shore-water around the Southern coast in Summer time, faced the world with the brave challenging gaze typical of young Australians. Her lithe figure and erect carriage spoke of life passed in the open air. A lover of sport, she was a good tennis-player and enjoyed a gallop with the best of them provided she had a decent mount.

Left fatherless at the age of twenty-one, Joan was sole owner of Windfells, a prosperous grazing property in the Western District of Victoria. She was now in her twenty-fifth year, and up to the present had experienced but few of the troubles and anxieties that fall to the lot of many station-owners. This freedom from worry was due, as she knew, to the cautious and untiring care of her manager, Tom Rawlins, who had been in full charge since her father's death. Everyone spoke well of him. Joan's aunt, Mrs. Robson, who had resided with her brother, Mr. Fetherston, at Windfells ever since his young wife died, leaving the bereft husband with little five-year-old Joan, could not speak too highly in praise of the manager.

"He's one in a thousand, my dear, and you ought to be very grateful indeed to have the services of so excellent a young man," she told her niece, who always agreed.

Nevertheless, she did not hesitate to criticise this paragon of a manager if she thought he deserved it. To-day was a case in point. He could have returned from the township before this. He should have hastened his coming, knowing how anxious she was to see him, for her unusual restlessness this evening was not without cause. Things were not going altogether smoothly on the station, and the girl has a feeling that there might be worse to come, and that before very long. Shearing was only half way through, and Rawlins had hinted at trouble brewing.

She wished he would come. He would have later information than the vague rumours which he had mentioned to her at lunch-time. She resented this delay. He might have come straight back to the house from the shed and sent a man for the mail to-day. But, though she intended to let him know she was displeased, she could not but acknowledge her absolute dependence on Rawlins. All her success at Windfells was due to his judgment and advice. He was so conscientious, so thorough. Joan admitted that without his help she would have sustained many a loss and come to grief over and over again. In fact, she leaned more on her manager than she realised. He was in truth her right hand in everything, and a faithful and trusty right hand he proved, guarding her interests, fighting her

battles and giving brotherly advice when he considered such to be necessary.

What his personal feeling for her might be the girl never stopped to consider. He was her manager, a position he filled to her entire satisfaction. Her aunt might throw out hints, and her girl friends also might go into raptures over her handsome Apollo of a manager, and suggest the likelihood of her falling in love with him, or he with her. Such ideas, however, she calmly brushed aside as not worth consideration. She was quite happy and contented with the world as it was. Why introduce any complications?

The only thing that might make her think of changing their present relations was a suggestion that Tom Rawlins might wish to leave Windfells. Most young men with ambition, and why should he not have the same ambition as other men, hoped to better themselves in life. There were offers of working partnerships open to young, steady, trustworthy fellows, and her manager could not be expected to give up his whole life for her benefit without some compensation. She knew the talk about Rawlins in the district. She sometimes wondered whether the time would come when, in order to bind him to her service, she might be persuaded to accept his suit. But that time had not yet arrived, so why bother about the future?

Away to the west a faint cloud of dust appeared on the road, a golden dust catching and reflecting the glow of the sinking sun. The frown disappeared from the girl's face. He was coming at last, coming with the mail-bag which he always brought from the township himself ever since the day Harry, the boy, got tipsy at the "Pub," and dropped bag and contents in the creek.

Joan's glance turned in the direction of the wool-shed almost hidden behind a belt of gums. Between the shed and homestead could be seen the shearers' hut. What trouble was being hatched at this very moment in that same hut, she wondered? Mr. Rawlins would know, and her eyes again sought the figure on horseback drawing rapidly nearer up the rising road. The house stood on a

hill. The township, with the creek running through, lay in the valley less than a mile away.

The girl's impatient gaze followed the rider as he bent from the saddle to unlatch the big entrance gate. Then, in the avenue, he was lost to sight for a moment, hidden by the spreading trees. Again he appeared, close by this time. Leaving his horse at the stable, he approached the house on foot. As he opened the picket gate into the flower-garden Joan went down the steps to meet him. As he drew near she could not but admit to herself that he was indeed good to look on. Tall, broad-shouldered and clean-limbed, with easy, swinging gait, promising strength of muscle and perfect health. He was still on the right side of thirty, though the responsibilities of life had added a year or two to his appearance in tracing lines of care on his brow. Joan noted the cloud on his face and scented trouble, for even the sight of his mistress, "divinely tall and most divinely fair," as he often quoted, could not altogether chase away his present worry.

She came to meet him like a young goddess of the sunset, stepping lightly, her white dress turned to pale gold, her auburn hair gleaming. It was the last dying flare. Even as he looked the light faded. The sun sank lower, until even the tall tree-tops on the highest point of the hill lay draped in shadow. Did it foretell a shadow about to fall on this girl's hitherto bright young life? the man wondered. Raising his hat he handed her the leather mail-bag.

"You're very late." There was a quiet reproach in her greeting.

"I'm sorry. I was delayed," he explained. She waited for him to continue, but as he remained silent, she was obliged to probe further.

"What kept you so long in the township?"

"Young Jack Pollen had a fall from his horse and put his wrist out," he told her.

"And you pulled it in again, I suppose?" she remarked, knowing Rawlins' skill in "first aid" work.

"I helped," he admitted. "The young fool made such a fuss over it, he wouldn't let me touch it for a long time."

"You knew how anxious I was for news of the shearing?" she said.

"I'm sorry I haven't better news for you, but ——," he shrugged his shoulders as if he felt very doubtful of the course the men would decide on.

"Then they won't listen to reason? They won't even be honest and stick to their agreement?" Her tone was indignant. "What is the use of drawing up an agreement if one side can break it in this way?" she went on. "We remain bound, and they can do as they choose, and we are at their mercy."

"It's all that d—er—that confounded Union 'Rep.' as they call him. I wish to heaven he'd never set foot on the place. The men were getting along all right until that fellow arrived," Rawlins said.

"But even he ought not to be able to make them break an agreement," she argued.

"He tells them we're not carrying it out properly and the men believe him."

"But how? I don't understand," the girl said. "Surely they can read it for themselves. They signed on for a pound a hundred, didn't they?"

"Yes, that's all right."

"And find themselves," she continued. "We pay the cook and supply them with meat at the same rate as last year."

"Yes," he assented moodily. "That's the wording of the agreement."

"Then why do they want to go back on us now?" she queried. "We'll carry out our part to the letter. They ought to know that."

"They say we don't intend to, or at least this wretched Union Representative says so."

"Tell him it's absolutely untrue," she exclaimed, hot with wrath at the injustice of the charge.

"You remember last year when you let them off a large part of the amount they owed us for their meat?"

"Because it was so wet and they lost so many days waiting for the sheep to get dry enough to shear," she reminded him. "I felt sorry for them, knowing some of the men

would have so little to take away with them if we had made them pay full price."

"Yes, I know. And when you urged it I didn't advise you against doing it, though I ought to have done so. It was a kind and generous act on your part. I never dreamt it would be used against us this year in the way it has. These fellows can't understand such kindly actions. They put it down to weakness on our side and believe they can force us to give in to any demand they make."

He spoke gloomily, feeling, perhaps, that the responsibility for last season's misunderstood charity lay at his door.

"I call them beasts!" It was the expression of righteous anger at such a display of ingratitude.

"Only one feels it to be an insult to decent beasts," he commented.

"What do they demand exactly?" she asked.

"All they can get by fair means or foul."

"You won't give in, Mr. Rawlins? You'll hold to the letter of the agreement?"

"To the spirit," he corrected. "The men say the wording of the agreement does give them what they demand. However, there's to be another 'pow-pow' at the hut this evening. The Rep. will harangue them again, and then they'll decide. They talk about interviewing you," he told her.

"Me? What good can that do them?"

"They know I won't yield a point. Probably they think they can talk you round."

"But didn't you make them understand that I give you a free hand to do whatever you think best?"

"They know that, still they say that they'll insist on talking it over with you in person."

Joan remained silent, in thought, while her companion stood by equally silent, save for the tapping of his riding-whip against the leather of his leggings. He gazed ruefully at the prospect lying so calm and peaceful before his eyes. Who could tell how soon this peace might be broken up, or what trouble might threaten from that band of men, quiet enough for the moment, but containing suffi-

cient dangerous elements once they were freed from control, to start a conflict difficult to subdue?

"I'll see them if they wish it," the girl announced presently. "But I'd like them to understand it is because I choose to do so, not because I'm afraid of them."

"They are certain to want to see you alone. Will you do so?"

"I shall see them in your presence, Mr. Rawlins, of course," she assured him. "I may want your help and advice."

"I shall not advise you to give in to all their demands," he told her. "It would place us in a false position. Nor would it be fair to other station-owners."

"I shall not budge from our agreement," she promised. "If they break faith, that's no reason we should."

"They may think by your being so generous last year they can persuade you to treat them in the same way this season," he reminded her.

"That was entirely different. I was really sorry for the poor fellows then. This year they have had fair weather all through, and never lost a day's work."

While she was speaking the tinkle of the dressing-gong sounded from the hall.

"Come," she said, turning to ascend the steps. "There's no use meeting trouble half-way. Don't tell Aunt Lavinia there's likely to be any trouble. It will only upset her —perhaps for nothing." She went to seek Mrs. Robson to give her her letters and papers, while Rawlins sought his room to make a hurried change.

Dinner at Windfells that evening passed off as usual, though to two of those present the air seemed to be heavy with portents. Aunt Lavinia, unheedful of the grave look on the manager's face, did most of the talking—also as usual. She had received letters from several friends in town, and between the courses she treated her companions to gossipy extracts from them. Once she inquired how the shearing was progressing, and, being told that there were only about half the sheep still unshorn, she launched out in praise of Tom Rawlins' cleverness as a manager.

"I don't know how it is," she prattled. "One hears of strikes and all sorts of dreadful happenings elsewhere, but you never have any trouble with the men, Mr. Rawlins. It's a gift! That's what it is. A heaven-born gift to be able to manage one's fellow creatures of the lower orders."

Aunt Lavinia used the term "lower orders" frequently. She said it sounded so much nicer than "common people."

"Unfortunately, Mrs. Robson, it's a gift that sometimes seems to belong to the wrong sort of person. The working man is too often the victim of vicious leadership."

Gathering his correspondence together, the manager excused himself to the ladies and departed to his office, where he shut himself in for the rest of the evening. Joan and her aunt spent the hours till bed-time reading the numerous papers and magazines newly arrived, by the light of the pink-shaded kerosene lamp that hung from the ceiling of the drawing-room. It was generally thus on mail-night. Letters to read, letters to be answered, and the news of the outer world to be conned. Sometimes Aunt Lavinia would read aloud while the girl worked at her embroidery or it might be household mending, though Mrs. Robson maintained that the latter was her own particular department. On other than mail nights Aunt Lavinia would suggest a game of crib, or, when a passing guest dropped in for the night, which happened frequently, they would make up a four with Rawlins, and play Bridge, as it was played in those days. The modern form of Auction Bridge had not then been invented. Life was less rapid. Motor-cars, though no novelty in the city, were few and far between in the country. Station owners, driving their spirited horses on the quiet country roads, swore —not always silently—at the approach of one of these unwelcome vehicles. Often, to avoid the risk of a bolt or an upset, they would turn the horses in the road, returning on their tracks rather than force the scared animals to face the fearsome monster.

Joan owned a pony cart, as well as a fine, upstanding riding-horse, answering to the name of "Sultan." The cart she used chiefly when accompanied by her aunt, who had never learned to ride. The district was then famous

for the quality of the horse-flesh bred there, and many a flash youth, who to-day would go in for motoring and record-breaking, was then quite satisfied to be seen handling the ribbons in a dashing tandem or more difficult unicorn team when attending local race meetings.

It was a happy, peaceful time when such an upheaval as a world-wide war would have been regarded as the dream of a madman—or a prophet.

Tired of reading, Joan rose.

"Good-night, Aunt Lavinia," she said, kissing the old lady.

She did not seek her bed immediately; though her aunt's kindly admonition, "Sleep well, dearie!" followed her, it almost seemed in mockery. The girl stepped out on to the verandah, and throwing herself into a lounging chair, gave herself up to anxious speculation. The leaves of the big walnut-tree, which sheltered that end of the varandah, were scarcely stirred by the soft night breeze. Beyond the garden fence all was dark, none of the house lamps being capable of throwing a light more than a few feet from the windows. The stillness of the bush was over all, though the bush is never quite silent, especially at night. Strange sounds and wild cries unnoticed during daylight may be heard in the dark hours, sending a thrill of nameless fear through those unaccustomed to Nature in her wilder moods. It was not Nature, however, in any mood, wild or tame, that furnished Joan with such unpleasant food for thought. A twinkling light down in the shearers' hut showed that a force less kind than Mother Nature was awake to-night. It was a light that glinted menacingly like an evil eye, Joan thought, a malignant vengeful gleam. The dogs at the hut barked fitfully, roused by the murmur of voices. From where Joan lay it reached her a confused noise of men's voices, loud one moment, almost inaudible the next. Of a sudden there rose a volley of sound as a roaring cheer was borne on the night breeze towards her. Joan sat up, her lips tightening while the sound grew feebler and died away.

In that hut were about twenty men, shearers, rouseabouts, and shed-hands of all descriptions—pickers-up,

rollers, balers, pressers—all the "omnium gatherum" to be met with on every station at shearing-time, and all united for one purpose, the robbing of a helpless girl!

"I hate them! Oh, how I hate them!" Joan spoke from her heart, which to-night was very sore at the injustice being practised upon her by those who were receiving shelter and employment from her hands.

Nevertheless, she was in bed and asleep long before Tom Rawlins had finished answering his letters, nearly all connected with the affairs of Windfells and its owner.

CHAPTER II.

An Interview and What Came of It.

During the busy days of shearing, Rawlins breakfasted early, and was out and down at the shed before Mrs. Robson and Joan were awake. Nor did they see him again as a rule until the afternoon, for he took his lunch with the men. This arrangement held good when everything was going smoothly and well. On the previous day, for example, he had returned to the house for lunch owing to the Representative of the Union having called a stop-work meeting, in consequence of which the shed was idle though the pens were ready filled with patient animals waiting their turn to be shorn.

This morning, Joan, having risen from the breakfast-table, glancing through the window, caught sight of the tall form of the manager making towards the house. He was probably coming to let her know the latest decision of the men. Though still some way off, she could see by his face that things were not very hopeful. He looked tired and worried—and no wonder, she thought.

"I suppose the men have struck!" she called to him as he came within hearing of her voice.

"They will if you don't meet their demands," he told her.

"And that means ——?" she queried.

"Exactly what I said yesterday, Miss Fetherston. They insist that the wording of the agreement gives them more than we hold it does, and if you don't satisfy their views about it they'll cease work. They're coming up as a deputation this morning to interview you and lay their case before you."

"I shall simply refuse to alter one iota," she declared, firmly.

"The worst of it is there are one or two men of rather a bad type among them, and with that sort to deal with one has to be careful," he warned her.

"But surely you don't want to let them think they can bully us into yielding weakly to any demand they choose to make?" she exclaimed.

"By no means, only ——" he paused.

"Of what are you afraid, Mr. Rawlins?"

"I don't know," he admitted.

"You mean you don't want to tell me?" she urged.

"I can't say I'm afraid of anything in particular really," he assured her. "But with such a number of irresponsible men—some doubtful characters—anything is possible. For instance, suppose they set fire to the grass and burnt our fences out of revenge. It has been done"

"Let us hope they won't be so wicked," the girl said, and though the suggestion brought a serious look to her face for the moment, it soon passed.

"Here comes my deputation if I don't mistake," she exclaimed, as three figures were seen to detach themselves from the group about the hut.

As Rawlins recognised them an exclamation of annoyance burst from him.

"Confound them!" he muttered. "I wish ——"

"What is it?" she asked, as he paused.

"It's that man, Bill Dawson. I wish to heaven they had chosen someone else to come and speak for them."

"Who are the others?"

"Perry and Hansen," he informed her.

"I remember those two," she said. "Has Dawson ever been employed here before?"

"Not in my time," he replied. "And I'll take jolly good care he'll never be taken on again. He's one of the irreconcilables. He's to blame for most of the trouble, a born agitator. I'm very sorry I ever let him sign on."

"Perhaps it's as well to know the worst at once," the girl said to reassure him. She spoke in her usual even tone. She knew his anxiety on her account, but she was not going to admit that there could be any cause for uneasiness.

Joan Fetherston was one of the brave spirits who refuse to bow before opposition. Certainly opposition such as

now presented itself was powerless to turn her from that path which she judged to be the right one.

Tom Rawlins let his eyes rest approvingly on his young mistress, as she stood there drawn up to her full height, waiting for the coming of the men. Very sweet and fresh she looked—fresh as the Spring morning he thought—in her sky blue linen frock, with its collar and cuffs of white muslin. The sleeves, cut wide and full in the fashion of the day, lent to her shoulders a greater breadth than Nature had bestowed, thus endowing her slim young figure with an added stateliness.

As the three men composing the delegation approached, not too eagerly, it seemed, and looking more or less inclined to turn tail and run, Joan stepped to the edge of the verandah, raised well above the level of the ground where they stood. Rawlins took his place slightly in the rear.

"Good-morning, Perry! I'm glad to see you back with us again. Good-morning, Hansen! You are not a stranger either. Good-morning, Dawson!" She tried to see the face of the third man, but failed. He kept deliberately in the background behind his two mates.

"Good-day, Mum!" the two in front responded, each bringing a hasty hand to their hats in acknowledgement of her greeting.

Dawson, she observed, offered no salute, and the omission annoyed her. Her pride was hurt, though she told herself he knew no better. She decided to take no further notice of him, confining the interview to the other two men. Dawson apparently was not anxious to be seen by her. He wore his slouch hat drawn well down over his face, the lower part of which was completely concealed by a thick growth of shaggy black beard. A most unprepossessing looking fellow, without a doubt. Mr. Rawlins was more than justified in warning her against him. She turned to Perry.

"You wish to speak with me, I hear?"

The man addressed indulged in some preliminary coughing and shuffling of his feet before answering. Joan waited patiently, a smile of encouragement lighting her face.

"You see, Mum—er—Miss, I mean, it's this way."

"Yes?" she said, kindly. "Go on."

"Well, we don't exactly think—er—some of us that is, not all ——"

"All on us thinks so," put in Hansen.

"Shut yer 'ead, Luny!" Perry did not relish being interrupted when he held the floor. "Some of us, Mum—er—Miss, I mean, don't think as you're meanin' to give us a fair deal over this 'ere agreement."

"Indeed! How is that, Perry?" Joan's voice was noncommittal.

"Well, we've 'eard as 'ow it's not agoin' to be carried out proper an' we don't intend to be done out o' our rights."

"Who told you the agreement was not going to be carried out?" the girl asked.

"The Rep. says so."

"He told you that I did not intend to carry out my own agreement?" There was indignation in the girl's tone.

"Well, I won't say you, Miss—but ——" Poor Perry found himself getting out of his depth. He felt his position dangerous, but neither from Hansen nor Dawson could he see help forthcoming.

"In any case," Joan went on, "what business is it of any outsider? He has nothing to do with our agreement. That is only between you and me."

"Well, Miss—er—Mum—er—Miss, I mean ——"

He found it very difficult to talk to Miss Fetherston as he had been directed by his mates. He was not accustomed to being spoken to in such soft, musical accents. Harsh tones in argument he could understand and answer on equal terms, but this gentle, refined young woman might have been a being from another sphere, condescending to ask him for information. It was quite a new experience for Perry, and he was at a disadvantage and was not feeling at all happy. Taking off his hat he scratched his head. Next he spat on the ground, and rubbed the spot with his boot.

"The Rep. says you ain't wantin' to give us a fair deal about the meat we're gettin' off you," he said at last,

goaded by Hansen's injunction, "Spit it out, man! Don't be the whole bloomin' dy!"

"Were you yourselves satisfied with the agreement before this Union agitator arrived?" Joan asked.

"We thought as 'ow it meant we'd get our meat 'arf price same as we did last year." The man got the lie out without a blush.

"Now, Perry! Can you look me in the face and tell me you really and truly thought that?" Joan demanded of the fellow in her clear, incisive voice. "The agreement says distinctly the same value as last year, not the same price. Last year I gave it to you at less than its value."

Joan's earnest face and confident speech had the effect of knocking poor Perry's carefully primed arguments out of his head. He floundered awkwardly, looking as if he wished himself a hundred miles or more away. After looking in vain to Hansen and Dawson to extricate him from the tangle, he blurted out—

"That's wot the Rep. told us we was ter say."

"Then you admit you had no grievance until this outsider came and manufactured one?" the girl demanded. "There would have been no trouble but for him, and it's a great pity he didn't try and find some honest work to do instead of living on the money you men earn and travelling about the country making mischief."

Joan looked rather splendid as she stood up to the men, her cheeks flushed and her eyes flashing defiance at the world of "Reps." Perry was completely silenced, his stock of argument failing him in the present situation.

Hansen, a small, restless youth, who had tried to urge Dawson to come forward and speak, but without success, now broke in.

"That's all very fine, Miss, but where'd the likes of us workin' men be if it wasn't for the Union lookin' arter our int'ests? Groun' darn us'd be like our fathers was afore us. Much the likes o' you cares wot becomes o' the likes of us unless the Union mikes yer."

Rawlins moved nearer to Miss Fetherston as the man hurled forth the defiant words. He had never pictured

Hansen as an aggressive unionist. The man he knew was regarded by his mates as being a "shingle short," and they nick-named him "Luny" for that reason. Now he stood there with his pale features working, his black, beady eyes afire with excitement, his fists extended threateningly towards the girl.

"You mark my word, Miss!" waggling his arm at her. "If you bloated land-grabbers thinks you can go on grindin' an' grindin' darn the workin' man, I tells you yer can't. You've 'ad yer good times an' we've 'ad ter sweat an' slive for yer. Now it's goin' to be our turn. Us workin' men 'as bin at the beck an' call o' you bloated toffs long enough. Well, it's got ter stop, an' don't you mike any mistake abaht it. Yer thinks we're agoin' ter shear your blasted wool ter mike money fer the likes o' you an' 'im ter spend in lucksery! Well, we're goin' ter chynge all that. We're agoin' ter demand our share. It's our rights we're askin' an' no more than wot's owin' to us. Ain't it us does all the work? Ain't it us as earns the wealth you an' your class wistes? An' ef yer refuses ter py us our fair share d'ye know wot'll 'appen ? Ye'll be smellin' burnt wool, that's wot! Ain't it, Bill? Burnt wool! He! He! Bill Dawson says so, don't yer, Bill?"

"Stow that, Luny!" growled Dawson, opening his lips for the first time, which made Joan turn her eyes from the agitated form of Hansen to the shadowed face beneath the down-drawn hat brim. Only the sinister glint of a pair of deep set eyes was visible from the shadow.

Here Perry, fearing the proceedings were taking a dangerous turn, sought to improve matters.

"Don't take no notice of 'im, Mum! 'E don't mean nothin'." He laid his hand on Hansen's arm. "Ye're ravin', Luny! You musn't talk that way to Miss Fethers-ton."

"Mustn't I? 'An 'oo's agoin' ter stop me I'd like ter know?" spluttered Hansen. "Ain't it Gawd's truth wot I'm syin' every word? She'll smell burnt wool orl right an' so'll us ef us don't get our rights. Dawson's done ut afore an' 'e'll do ut agen, won't yer, Bill?"

Like a bolt from a catapult a fist shot out, catching the

smaller man a smashing blow on the point of the jaw, which sent him sprawling at their feet.

Joan uttered an exclamation at the cowardly act.

"You brute!" and her eyes flashed with anger. The next minute she shrank back trembling as Hansen, picking himself up, turned on Dawson a countenance convulsed with passion, and let forth a string of invectives that caused the girl to cover her ears in the effort to shut out the horrible sound.

"Be silent, man!" commanded Rawlins, ablaze with anger that his mistress should have to listen to such language.

"Stow that or I'll down you again!" and, with upraised arm, displaying great knots of muscle, and decorated with blue tattoo lettering, Dawson advanced threateningly on his victim.

Hansen, still shrieking out curses, fled for safety behind Perry. "D—n yer, Bill Dawson! I'll get yer yet. I'll put yer awye. See ef I don't! 'Oo burnt Yarrapine? 'Oo set fire to Mulwater w'en old man Blaky wuz near burnt ter death? An' 'angin' matter 'n you'll 'ang yet yer ——" and a further volley of expletives poured forth.

As the awful accusations fell from Hansen, now almost foaming at the mouth with rage, Rawlins, glancing towards Dawson, saw murder in his eyes.

"Get away back to the hut, you young fool," he ordered, and Hansen, still muttering, shambled off.

"Dawson, if you lay your hand on him again I'll give you in charge," the manager said, sternly. "Now, Perry, you go back and tell the men Miss Fetherston doesn't intend to hear any more to-day. If they choose to go on quietly and carry out our agreement, well and good. If not, say I'll get others who will. Now, go both of you," whereupon Perry, touching his hat, and Dawson, without word or sign, turned and slouched away like a couple of whipped curs.

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Joan. I wouldn't have had this happen for the world. I wouldn't have allowed them to come up to see you at all had I thought for a moment anything of the sort would take place."

Rawlins was pale with vexation, the girl noticed, at the insult offered to herself. She sympathised with what he must be feeling.

"And I'm afraid after all I have done no good," she said. "Perhaps only made matters worse—added fuel to the fire."

"It's not your fault. Men like that are beyond reasoning with. Only—I'll be jolly glad when that fellow, Dawson, is safely off the place," and there was an anxious ring in his words.

"Did you know before this morning that the burnings Hansen accused him of were done by him?" she asked.

"Yes, I heard it rumoured that all the incendiary fires of the last few years were laid to his account, but, though he was suspected, there was never sufficient evidence to sheet it home to him. Of course," he told her, "I had heard nothing of this rumour before engaging him or I'd never have let him sign on."

His words were gloomy, and Joan felt unusually depressed as she left him and went indoors.

Throwing off the broad-brimmed hat that she had been wearing, she sat down at her writing-desk. She had a letter to write—a most important letter, for it was in answer to an invitation from a small child friend to a birthday party. Joan did not find it easy to bring her thoughts back from her recent troubles to the frame of mind proper to the penning of a suitable epistle. By a strong effort of will, however, she at length forced herself to forget the recent scene she had taken part in, and succeeded in concocting a gay little note full of the loving nonsense six-year-old Tottie Davenant could enjoy. She promised faithfully to carry out the child's request and bring her a birthday present that nobody before "had even-*ever* seen." No more dolls, Tottie had said, because Teddy only laughed at her dollies and said only girls cared for dolls.

Teddy was seven, and looked down upon his sister from his superior height of age and masculinity, usual with brothers.

Joan finished her note, placing it in the mail-bag, which always hung ready in the hall, and which she knew would in a short time be taken by the manager down to the post-office to catch the mail-coach passing through the township that afternoon on its tri-weekly journey. She did not know that one letter sent from Windfells that day was addressed to the constable in charge of the nearest police-station, which happened to be the thriving town of Colterton, nearly thirty-five miles away. Rawlins was sending a request for a mounted trooper to be sent up at once, as he feared trouble with the shearers.

The trooper could not arrive till the following morning, as Colterton was not then connected with the township by telephone, and, meantime, nobody could tell what devil's work might take place. Truly the manager had a heavy weight of responsibility and Joan, when she thought of what rested on his shoulders, wondered how she would have got on had Rawlins never come to Windfells, and more weighty still was the question, what would she do if he left her.

Her note despatched, the girl let her thoughts return to the interview of the morning. Supposing that which had occurred at Yarrapine and Mulwater and other stations she could call to mind, were to happen at Windfells! She paled at the thought. Hundreds of pounds' worth of newly-shorn wool, in bales, ready for carting to the nearest railway, still lay in the wool-room. The insurance covered nothing but the building. None of this wool was insured at present. Suppose Dawson—she shuddered at the name—suppose this dreadful man were to do here what his mate accused him of doing elsewhere, burn her shed and all that wool—her wool—a considerable part of her year's income. How awful to think of all that beautiful wool, the fruit of twelve months hard work and ceaseless care, being swept away in a few minutes by the wicked act of one evil-minded man! It must be prevented at all costs.

The shed must not be left unprotected for a single night while Dawson, or indeed any of the men in their present mood, remained on the place. She must speak to the manager.

"Tell Mr. Rawlins I want to see him as soon as he returns from the township," she told the maid. Then, in answer to the call of "Joan, Joan! Do come here for a minute!" she joined her aunt in the breakfast-room.

"See, I have almost finished dressing her, and I want your opinion about the ribbons. Shall I put pink or blue? Or do you think Tottie would prefer them all white, like a real baby?"

"I'd have them all white, Auntie," answered her niece, taking up the dainty little garments and admiring the fine needlework and neat stitchery with which they were adorned. "How beautifully you have done them," she declared. "I'd never have the patience."

"I have enjoyed doing them—every one. See, there's the little under-vest. Here are the chemise and knicks, and two petties. This is the frock. These are the booties, and last of all the little hood," and she held up each garment proudly for her niece's approbation. "They take a lot of time, of course, and the booties I had to unpick three times before I got them to come right. The pattern was too large. But, think of dear Tottie's delight when she finds they all take off!"

Joan agreed. "Any child would love them, I'm sure."

"That's one good thing in choosing a present for a little girl," the lady went on. "One cannot go wrong in giving a doll. There's nothing little girls love to get more than a new doll, is there?"

Joan tried not to think of Tottie's message.

"Now with a boy it's very different," continued her aunt. "Boys are sure to want something dangerous, such as pop-guns or trumpets."

"I don't call trumpets dangerous, Aunt Lavinia."

"Well, not dangerous, perhaps, but noisy and objectionable. Now a doll!" She took up the large waxen-faced French doll lying amidst the tissue paper in its box at her side. "Look at her eye-lashes and real hair! I'd love to be there when the dear child opens it, just to see her face."

"Why not come to Bunglatta with me and give it to Tottie yourself," suggested the girl.

"No, dear, I'd rather you take it and give it with my love and best wishes, and, Joan ——"

"Yes, Auntie?" as the other paused.

"I'd like Tottie to call her 'Lavinia.' Do you think she would?"

"To be sure she will. I'll tell her dollie's name is 'Lavinia.' We'll put her name on the box-lid."

"I always thought," mused the old lady, "that if ever I had a little girl of my own I'd name her Lavinia. But God never granted my prayer, dearie," and the gentle eyes filled with unshed tears. Joan stooped and kissed the soft cheek on which the roses of a bygone youth still lingered faintly as if loth to depart from a loved dwelling-place.

"Dearest Aunty, if you had had a daughter of your own what should I have done?" she demanded, playfully, bringing a smile to the gentle motherly eyes that had watched over her so lovingly ever since she could remember.

"You are quite right, my dear. You've been as dear to me as if you were my own child, and I'm only an ungrateful old woman to grumble when I have so much to be thankful for."

CHAPTER III.

The Wool-Shed's Guardian.

"Mr. Rawlins, I want you to have a mattress and pillow and a rug taken down to the shed this evening," Joan told the manager when he came to her in answer to her summons.

"I was thinking about that very thing," he replied. "It will be just as well if one of the men sleep there to-night—either old Jacob or Strong," mentioning two of the most reliable of the station hands who had been in the employ of Miss Fetherston's father.

"I'm going to sleep there myself," the girl announced.

"You, Miss Joan! Impossible!" exclaimed Rawlins, incredulously. "I certainly can never permit such a thing for a moment."

"Your permission will not be asked, Mr. Rawlins," and the girl's lips took on the determined line that the manager had seen but once or twice since he had known her, but which he knew promised a clash of wills. However, he also was strong-willed in his own way, and his present duty unquestionably lay in shielding the girl from possible harm, even if he had to forfeit her friendship in the process.

He put before her the case as it must appear to others than themselves, and asked what would be said outside if it were known that with so many strong, able-bodied men at her service, she, Miss Fetherston, owner of Windfells, and its thirteen thousand acres of rich land, were to do such an unheard of act.

He might have argued for an hour for all the impression it made, he told himself afterwards. He doubted even if she listened to half he said to her.

"I have made up my mind to sleep in the wool-room to-night, so all you have to do is to carry out my orders, Mr. Rawlins."

She saw the hot colour surge up through the sun-burn on the man's cheeks as she reminded him of his position as her paid employe. To be sure, her conscience troubled her when she noted the reproach in the man's eyes turned upon her. She looked away, feeling as if she had needlessly hurt some faithful animal that cannot understand harsh words and unkind usage from one who has hitherto been kind. Instantly she softened.

"I have thought it over well and have come to the conclusion that if there is any likelihood of danger or risk ——"

"There may be a risk, of course," he put in. "That's why I maintain you must not do it, Miss Joan."

"If there is a risk," she went on, ignoring the interruption, "it is my duty to take it."

"Why? When you have others willing to take it and much more fitted than yourself? Let me sleep there to-night, Miss Joan," he begged.

"It is my property that will be endangered. Why should you or anyone else risk injury for it?"

"Because I'm paid for doing it," he reminded her, bringing his mouth into the straight, firm line she admired so much when he was dominating other men. When opposed to herself she found it less admirable.

"How many bales are there at present in the wool-room?" she inquired, refusing to pursue the argument.

He took a note-book from his pocket, and turned to the last entry.

"Thirty-five there now," he told her. "We sent away sixty last time, and the waggons should have been back again for these to-day. They're bound to be here by to-morrow, and we'll get the whole lot off at once."

"Provided there are any bales left to send off," she reminded him.

"Miss Joan!" he pleaded. "You won't insist on doing this. It's a mad thing, believe me. And I—what will be said of me if I should let you think of doing it?"

"What does it matter what other people say or think? You may set your mind at rest, Mr. Rawlins. I'll take

the whole blame if there is to be any blame," she assured him.

"But think of your aunt. What will Mrs. Robson say?" he urged.

"Nothing. I don't intend that she shall know anything about it. I depend on you to keep it from her," she told him.

"And the men?" he asked. "Is it to be kept from them also? Because it will be difficult to prevent it's leaking out."

"I want them to know, but they must learn it indirectly," she told him. "Please don't proclaim it to them with the beating of drums." She broke into a gay laugh. "Don't you think we're taking this much too seriously, Mr. Rawlins?" she spoke, lightly. "After all, it's only as if I were going for an evening stroll to the shed, staying there an hour or two and returning in the morning. I don't intend to close my eyes even."

"I wish to heaven I had the right to forbid your doing it!" he exclaimed, fervently.

His eyes caught hers, and held them for a moment. What she read there caused her own to drop. She laughed lightly, intending to keep their conversation out of dangerous channels, whither it seemed drifting.

"You'd make a capital elder brother, Mr. Rawlins. Only I'm afraid," looking at him mischievously, "I'm afraid you'd find me rather a troublesome sister sometimes."

The manager fell into her mood.

"Well, I'm glad I'm not your brother, really," he answered. "But won't you let us pretend that I'm your big brother to-night? Just this once, *please*, Miss Joan."

"And take my place over there to-night?" nodding towards the wool-shed where the setting sun was already decking the thick gum foliage with tints of bronze.

"Yes, Miss Joan! Please do! I can't bear the thought of you down there alone."

But she would not yield.

"If there is any risk," she asserted again, "and of course there may be none; but if there should be, I am the proper person to look after my own property. And

another thing—when they think there is a woman there, they are more likely to hesitate about doing anything of the sort than if a man were concerned. Let us give them credit for a certain amount of chivalrous feeling, Mr. Rawlins."

"Yes, there's something to be said for your point of view," he admitted, "and taking them altogether I don't think there's one of them capable of committing an act of revenge on you, Miss Joan—excepting Dawson," he added. "The others would be ashamed to fight a woman with the weapon of incendiarism."

"That man, Dawson—when shall we be rid of him?" she asked.

"To-morrow, I hope. I told any who refused to go on with the shearing, according to the agreement, to come up and I'll pay them off in the morning."

"You think some may stay on and finish it?" she asked. "I thought they had to do as the Union 'Rep.' tells them."

"I'm hoping for the best," the manager said. "Probably when we are rid of Dawson and perhaps one or two of the irreconcilables, things will settle down quietly. In that case we'll cut out next week."

"Let us trust so. But, in the meantime, Dawson and the one or two others, being still on the place, I suppose any mischief may be brewing," Joan said, thoughtfully, letting her gaze follow the track to the hut.

He nodded.

"You'll have the mattress and the other things taken down for me?" she asked.

"If you insist!" ruefully.

"I must."

"Very well," with a sigh of resignation. "But I shall sit up, too, so you will know someone besides yourself is keeping vigil, Miss Joan."

"I shall be glad to know that," she admitted, "and I shall feel perfectly safe from the machinations of a dozen Bill Dawsons."

As daylight died away and the soft October night settled slowly down upon the homestead and station buildings,

there was nothing to indicate that anything out of the ordinary course of events was threatening. Even the shearers' hut was wrapped in silence, the men having passed the day in talk and argument among themselves, found little voice or inclination for the usual song and chorus to while away the evening hours. The barking of dogs, bleating of sheep, the occasional lowing of a bereft mother cow among the other nightly sounds familiar to her ear, broke the silence, as Joan, in a thick dark coat, took her way to the shed. Rawlins accompanied her to see that the bedding was placed in the manner she approved. He was careful to draw the mattress away from the draught of the roughly-laid boards, and found a snug corner behind some bales to lay it.

"This door bolts on the inside," he told her, "and the one at the other side I'll padlock on the outside and push the key under the door to you. You wouldn't like my revolver?"

"No thanks."

He handed her the electric torch he had used to light them through the darkness. "Good-night! And remember I shall be keeping watch," and he walked slowly back to the house, where all was now dark, the household having retired ere the girl set out.

He was tired and heavy from lack of sleep the previous night, but he had no intention of giving in to the weariness that beset his body. His self-constituted guardianship of his mistress was to him a sacred trust. He resolved to pass the remainder of the night with a book, and chose "Pickwick" from his bookshelf, judging that the humour of Mr. Weller and Sam were well fitted to drive away slumber, if only in contrast with the events at present occupying his mind. On a table by the window stood his reading-lamp. Pulling up the blind so that he had a full view of the shed and hut buildings, every time he raised his eyes, he sat down to re-read his favourite chapters, till the first flush of dawn should announce that all danger was over for the time being. He intended to be at the shed the moment the morrow's sun should appear. Till then ——

After he had left, Joan listened to his regular footfalls till they ceased in the distance. Then she made a tour of the shed, aided by the torch. She inspected the door-locks and found them as Rawlins said. It had an uncanny feeling she told herself, being shut up here alone, away from Aunt Lavinia and the rest, with nobody near but the occupants of the men's hut. The bleating and lowing got on her nerves before long. She wished it would stop. A melancholy hoot from a neighbouring tree made her shudder. For a moment she lost her courage and resolved to give it up and go back to the house, but then came the remembrance of her brave words earlier in the day. Were all her fine resolutions to be so easily upset? If only to show Tom Rawlins that she was capable of carrying through this thing she had undertaken against his wishes, she must stick to her guns. She found her way back to where her kind friend had arranged for her a soft bed and pillow among the stacked bales, and stretching herself on it lay down to think. For she had no intention of letting herself fall asleep.

CHAPTER IV.

The Incendiary.

"Mr. Rawlins! Mr. Rawlins! The shed's on fire and they say there's someone in it and don't know how to get them out!"

"My God!"

The manager was up like a shot and on the way to the blazing building at racing speed, leaving the breathless messenger far behind.

The whole scene was brightly lit up by the flames from the burning structure. Every object for some distance around stood out clear cut as in the light of day. Thick and black over one end of the shed rose a dense cloud of smoke—the end where lay the fatal bales of wool and —the horror of the thought seized his mind, almost paralysing his limbs as he ran—where also lay the mattress he had drawn there for the girl to rest upon.

How he cursed his foolish weakness in allowing Joan to carry out her mad idea; for not having locked the door and refused to let her enter; for not insisting on staying beside her to guard his loved lady through the hours of danger, and, greatest folly of all, for permitting himself to fall asleep instead of remaining on the watch throughout the night. Oh fool! fool! fool!

"In God's name where's Miss Fetherston?" he panted, as he reached the men gathered round the scene of the fire. The shed was now a fiery furnace belching forth an inky reek, overpoweringly nauseous with the smell of the burning wool.

Seared groups of men stared at the distraught questioner, but none had any answer to give.

"Miss Joan! Miss Joan!" he repeated, in agonised accents. "Oh, where in God's name can she be? She was sleeping in the wool-room, among the bales."

"Gawd 'elp the por lidy, then! That's wur the fire commenced." It was old Jacob, a station hand, who found voice at length.

"Joan! Joan! Oh, my love!" Rawlins was beside himself, his face haggard, and drawn, and desperate. "Break down the door, somebody!" he shouted hoarsely. "Break it down, you fools, I say, and I'll get through to her." Then, as nobody hastened to carry out his order: "Help me with this log, men, and we'll smash through the blasted bolts," and Rawlins seized the end of a fallen tree-trunk and endeavoured to drag it single-handed towards the blaze.

"No go, sir. Ye couldn't face that," they told him, and as if to prove their words true, long tongues of flame shot out, forcing them to seek safety farther away. Soon the whole doorway fell outwards with a startling report, scattering a shower of sparks into the night.

"Let me get in to her!" and Rawlins made a dash towards the opening left by the fallen door, now like the mouth of a fiery chasm. He was seized and held back by some of those nearest to him.

"Don't be a bally fool, sir, yer carn't do nothin' to help her now. There ain't no 'uman bein' alive in that there 'ell by this time anyways. Wot's the use o' committin' sooiside?"

"Let me go, curse you! Let me go, I say!" and he fought and bit at his captors, raving and cursing like a mad creature, stigmatising them as murderers.

Into the midst of his fighting and struggling to free himself came a diversion. A voice, high and shrill with excitement, could be heard above the turmoil.

"Miss Fetherston's safe! Tell Mr. Rawlins! She's safe —Perry's got 'er out at the back of the shed." One of the young rouseabouts brought the news, panting as he told it. The manager tore himself from the hands that held him and raced round the burning building, unheeding the sparks falling like fiery rain upon him.

"Joan! Miss Joan! Where are you?" he sobbed the words from his parched throat.

"'Ere y'are, Mr. Rawlins!" and, guided by one of the men, he found the girl where she had been carried out of reach of the heat and blinding smoke. On a sloping bank beneath a stately, spreading gum, where the grass was thick and soft they had laid her.

Perry knelt beside her, supporting her body, while her beautiful head rested against his shoulder. Her eyes were closed.

Rawlins threw himself down beside her.

"Joan! My love! Speak to me!" he cried, in agony, fear for the moment conquering the hope that had filled him upon hearing that she was safe.

She stirred at the sound of his voice, turning her face towards him, but she still kept her eyes closed. The smarting pain, caused by the smoke, through which her rescuer and she had passed still held her eyelids down.

"Is that you, Mr. Rawlins? How did it all happen?" she asked, weakly.

"I don't know. Oh! Miss Joan, can you ever forgive me? I can never forgive myself for falling asleep tonight when I had promised and determined to remain awake to watch over your safety."

Her lips, notwithstanding they felt dry and cracked from the effect of the terrific heat, yet strove to smile at him.

"Did you go to sleep, too? So did I, and I never meant to, either." It was pathetic to see her effort to make light of her own suffering. Tears were in the manager's eyes. He did not know whether the girl's sight was injured. He longed for her to open her eyes, and yet dreaded what he might discover there. He took her from Perry's supporting arms and she lay in his own, resting against his body. The movement did not cause her to wince, whereat he felt relief. At least her body and limbs had sustained no serious injury, for, had the change of position been painful, she must have moaned. She lay there, her head resting on his breast, the smile still curving her lips. Begrimed though her face was, he thought it still the most beautiful face in the world, and thanked the kind Providence that had spared her life this night.

"Who carried me out of the fire?" she asked, after a short interval.

"Perry," answered the manager. "He's here beside us."

"Thank you, Perry," she said softly, and moved her hand in search of his.

The man addressed cleared his throat to say something in reply, but no words came.

"You must have got badly burnt, I'm afraid, Perry," she said, after a pause.

"Nothin' to speak on, Mum—Miss, I mean," the fellow answered, sheepishly. "I'd do it again to-morrow, Mum."

"I hope not, Perry," and she tried to laugh, but gave it up with a half sigh, when her parched throat refused to respond.

Someone brought a pannikin of water, which Rawlins held to her lips.

"Who did it—set it on fire, I mean?" she asked the manager. "Do they think it was an accident? Or ——" she paused, not knowing who might be within ear-shot, and, suffering though she was, still unwilling to wound.

"Nobody knows, as far as we can tell at present, but it must have been burning for some time before the alarm was given. The fire had got a good hold when I first saw it," Rawlins said. Then, seeing her make an effort to raise herself, he asked, "Do you think you can let us get you back to the house now, Miss Joan?"

She nodded, but when she tried with the help of the two men to stand up, she could not walk. As the house stood a fair distance off, and the road to be traversed lay uphill, Rawlins made a hammock from a blanket slung between two saplings, and they bore her home so, Perry insisting on taking one end of the improvised litter, though urged to get his own injuries attended to at once.

"They can wait, bless you," he declared, pluckily. "I've got the lady safe out o' danger an' I'm agoin' to see 'er safe 'ome, so I be."

In truth Perry appeared to have come off surprisingly well. The fire had left no mark on his person, neither were his clothes damaged, that Rawlins could see. He

congratulated the man on his wonderful escape from injury, praising his action in rescuing Miss Fetherston.

They were obliged to arouse Aunt Lavinia and confess the whole thing after all. The good soul fussed about with sympathy in her words, and household remedies in her hands. She produced cotton-wool and carron oil, and boracic lotion for the girl's smoke-blinded eyes, hovering about her like a ministering angel, till Joan convinced her that the pain was soothed and that she felt perfectly easy. She now wanted nothing more than a good sleep to make her feel quite herself again.

It was daylight by the time the last of the fire had burnt itself out, leaving a shapeless mass of charred timbers and twisted sheets of corrugated iron to mark the place where the wool-shed had stood.

As to the origin of the fire no one professed to have any doubt. Dawson's name was freely mentioned in connection with it. Moreover, if confirmation of the suspicion were needed, it was furnished by the fact that Dawson had vanished. Inquiries made by Rawlins elicited the information that nobody had set eyes on him since the previous evening. Hansen was the last, apparently, and he admitted having been glad to see the last of his assailant.

"I see Bill quit the 'ut just before the bloomin' plice blized up," he asserted.

"Tell me," said the manager, "do you think he knew there was anyone inside?"

"Corse 'e know'd. All on us know'd as you was 'avin' the plice watched."

"And you think he knew it was Miss Fetherston herself who was there?" Tom questioned, grimly.

Hansen grinned. "We pretty well all dropped onter it as she'd be there," he said. "Didn't think she'd be wantin' fer company, neither," he added.

Towards lunch-time mounted-constable O'Donnel rode up to Windfells. He came in answer to Rawlins' note of the previous day.

"I see you've been havin' some bad business here, Mr. Rawlins," was his greeting, as the manager met him.

"Yes—I hoped you'd be in time to stop it. It might have been much worse, though. Miss Fetherston was sleeping in the wool-room, and Perry got her out only just in time," and he related the events of the night as far as he knew them.

"And you think there's no doubt. It's Dawson again?"

"Everything points to it's being he. Of course, I know it may be a case of 'Give a dog a bad name,' but we've no reason to suspect any of the others. Though young Hansen talks a lot about setting fire to property, it's only repeating what he has heard Dawson accused of doing."

"Ah! well, Mr. Rawlins, let's hope we'll get enough evidence this time to take action," remarked O'Donnel. "Meantime, I'll interview his mates. Maybe they'll let out something that'll help. The worst of this sort of business is they hang together through thick and thin—look on all employers as their natural-born enemies. They think splittin' on a mate ain't playin' the game, though if Dawson's guilty of all that's been laid at his door, he's one of the worst criminals outside Pentridge."

Hansen heard the remark. "It'll be an 'angin' matter this time, won't it? Lordy! 'Ow I'd larf ter see Bill Dawson with 'is neck in a noose. Gawd! wouldn't I, jes'!"

It looked, however, as if Hansen's pious wish was not to be gratified. Though all the police-stations, not only in that district, but throughout the State, were notified, and detailed descriptions of the wanted person, embodying the most intimate particulars, were circulated broadcast over the country, no trace of the man could be found. He had vanished as completely as if he had perished in the conflagration that had been kindled by his own hand. Only the fact that no remains of human bones were to be found among the debris would convince the police that this was not the case.

CHAPTER V.

Joan's Lover.

Joan was not laid up for long. The few burns, painful at the time, soon healed under her aunt's treatment. The worst injury was that due to a burning batten falling across her legs and pinning her down. Her thick coat had prevented the rest of her clothing from becoming ignited, but her flesh was badly bruised and painful from the effect of the scorching heat.

"I don't know how ever poor Perry got it off me without burning his hands frightfully in lifting it," she remarked to her aunt.

"A Providential thing such a brave man was at hand, dearie, to rescue you. Such a mad thing for you to do! It makes my blood run cold to think of what might have happened. I lie in bed and dream of it every night," commented the old lady, with a shudder. "And to think that with all these strong, able-bodied men getting good wages for working for you and attending to your interests, there could be any necessity for you, my niece, the daughter of my dear brother, to indulge in such an adventure! It's enough to make your poor dead father turn in his grave. I don't know what Mr. Rawlins could have been thinking of to allow it. I shall talk to him and tell him my opinion."

"No, no, please Aunty! He tried to dissuade me. He's in no way to blame, really," the girl assured her. She knew the manager was blaming himself bitterly, and wished to shield him from further suffering on her account.

"I want to see Perry before he leaves," she told them, when she recovered from the first shock of her narrow escape. "I must ask him about a ring I missed the night of the fire. It's curious," she went on. Do you know I could swear I felt him remove it from my finger?"

Rawlins, to whom she addressed her request, showed astonishment.

"Do you mean to say Perry stole it?" he asked incredulously. "It seems an awful accusation."

"It wasn't worth stealing, that's the funny thing. It was of next to no value—a little plain gold ring, set with pink coral, given me by a schoolfellow when we were both leaving," she informed him.

"And you say you actually felt him take it?" Rawlins asked. "Remember you were scarcely in a fit state to understand what was happening."

"I know that," she admitted. "I think I lost consciousness for a few moments altogether when that beam fell on me. I couldn't move and saw nothing for it, but to lie there helpless till I burnt to death. It was awful! The horror of it took away my senses. I can realise now the feelings of a trapped animal."

The man murmured something that sounded like "poor little girlie."

"I think I began to come back to consciousness again when I felt myself lifted up, and knew I was being carried through dense blackness. I couldn't open my eyes for the smoke, and I thought it was you carrying me." She marked the quick catch of his breath.

"My God! I wish it had been, Joan!"

"I could see nothing, and how Perry managed to find his way out through the blazing building with me in his arms, is marvellous. But it was when he laid me on the ground I felt him grope for my hand—you see I was getting over my terror of the fire when once I was out in the open air, and I was conscious of things about me, then. Well, when he let go my hand the ring was not on it!"

"But do you mean to say you were thinking about such a trifle after what you had just escaped?" he questioned.

"Perhaps not. It may have been a sort of sub-conscious impression," she suggested.

"Don't you suppose it may have slipped off your finger while he was dragging you out of the fire? It seems to me the more probable explanation."

Joan shook her head. "It never slipped off before," she declared.

"And you're quite certain you were wearing it?"

"Quite! I left my other rings in the house. This one I only value because Nell Davenant gave it to me. It's of no intrinsic worth."

"There's no harm in asking the men to make a search," he said, "though I'm afraid it's rather like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"And tell them there'll be a reward for finding it. But I must question Perry also. The impression of his having removed it while he held my hand in his is so vivid."

But, though Perry answered all her questions more or less fully, he stoutly denied seeing or feeling the ring.

"S'welp me Mum—Miss—I never touched no ring. I'd no more think of takin' a bit o' your jewellery than Mr. Rawlins hisself would. An' ef ever I'd done any low down job o' that sort—which I didn't, mind yer—but ef I done it, I say, d'ye think I'd not own up t'it arter you been an' give me this fifty quid?" touching his pocket where her cheque lay.

She could not do otherwise than accept the man's statement, whatever her belief might be to the contrary. He seemed honest and his statement about the ring rang true, though he appeared disinclined to enlarge on the manner of his rescue of Joan. She was inclined to give in and agree with Rawlins that she must have dreamed it. But when, tempted by the promise of a reward, the men busied themselves in a thorough search of the blackened debris of the shed, and the paddock around it, without success, she returned to the subject.

"I seem to remember distinctly the feel of his hand on mine, and then the ring slowly drawn off," she repeated.

Reaching forward, the manager took her hand and pressed it gently.

"Is there anything else you remember happening to you that night, Miss Joan?" he asked softly. "Can you recall the words I spoke to you, when I took you from Perry and held you in my arms?"

The quick colour that dyed her cheeks was sufficient answer.

"I remember," she murmured, and the look in her eyes encouraged him to continue.

"Joan!" He spoke her name in a whisper. There was a world of love in the man's eyes. "Joan! I pray I may never have to go through, again, the torture I suffered when I thought—I thought—ah!" and he covered his face with his free hand, a sob shaking his strong frame bending over her.

"Don't—dear friend, please!" The girl laid her hand on the lowered head. "It is over, let us try and forget it."

"For the time I went mad and raved like a lunatic," and he shuddered at the recollection of those awful moments. "You know I blamed myself for it."

"You are wrong to do that," she said. "You could not prevent it."

"But I should have been firm. I ought not to have allowed you to do it, even if I had been compelled to lock you up."

She laughed, and a thrill went through him as her fingers pressed the hand in which she let hers rest.

"The role of a tyrant would be a new one for you. I can't fancy your playing it *con amore*, you're much too gentle."

There was an encouragement in her voice as if wishing to lead him on.

Raising the hand he still held to his lips, "Dearest lady!" he pleaded. "You know—you must long have known—that you are all the world to me. Joan, dearest, you have been queen of my heart for so long, only I have never dared to tell you so. It would have been presumption. But now, dearest—now that you have learnt my secret, Joan—tell me, beloved! Is there any hope for me?"

The girl hesitated. She had felt she knew what he would say—she expected it. She knew also what her answer ought to be. She intended to say "Yes," without any beating about the bush. He had been so good, so more than devoted to her interests for so long. Her aunt, too, would be so pleased, and others she knew would be equally delighted at hearing she had chosen such a suitable mate. But yet—but yet ——. She opened her lips

to give him the answer he was longing for, but the words that fell from them, almost in spite of herself, were certainly not what he hoped to hear.

"I don't know what to say, Tom," she replied, after a momentary pause. "I *do* like you and esteem you very, very much, and I feel horrid after all you have done for me and for Windfells. It seems so ungrateful ——"

"I don't want your gratitude. I want your love!" he broke in. "Dearest, can't you give me a little bit of love? Ever so little. I'll be content to live in hopes of your whole heart later on, if only you'll bless me with a morsel of it now."

He had his arm round her, and she did not draw away from his clasp.

"I'm afraid, Tom, I can't—not at present—perhaps later on—" she could not go on. She felt it would be wrong to promise now what she might never be able to perform. But he was quick to seize even the shadow of a promise.

"I'm willing to wait as long as ever you wish, sweetheart," he assured her. "If only you'll let me go on worshipping and hoping, I won't ask you to promise me any more now."

"Very well," she sighed as he released his arm from about her. "Let us leave it at that." Then, turning on him a glance that compensated for all he had ever done for her, she added, "Tom, dear, I couldn't bear to think I had hurt you. I do appreciate the honour you do me in asking me to be your wife. But I feel I'm not ready to give you the answer you wish—yet."

"Tell me! Is there anyone else?" he demanded, his heart sinking at the possibility.

"Nobody! I can give you that consolation at any rate," she smiled.

"Then I can wait."

"And you'll let everything go on just the same between us, just as if this had never been spoken?" she begged.

He promised, though it would be hard.

"I'll wait, since you are not ready yet to give me the answer I had hoped for. And I shall take comfort in the

knowledge that you have not said 'No!' But, should you change your decision and find you may come to care, Joan, dear, you'll let me know? I'll want to ask you every day till you say 'Yes,' but I know I mustn't."

"Ask me again in a month," she said, laughing at his impatience. And so it was settled.

CHAPTER VI.

The Prodigal's Return.

Bunglatta, a fine property containing upwards of thirty thousand acres, was owned by Stephen Davenant. It comprised some of the finest sheep country in that part of the Western District, its famous stud flock being as widely known as the boundaries of the Commonwealth. Wool-growers came from all parts of Australia to purchase for the purpose of improving the quality and value of their wool. A sprinkling of crossbred sheep were to be found on Bunglatta, but it was the super quality of its merino wool that made its name famous.

Stephen Davenant, a hard-featured man of considerable shrewdness, and a capacity for money-making, had purchased the property some years back, and never had reason to repent his bargain. It lay about thirty miles southward of Windfells, and was more accessible from the city, being but a few miles distant from the railway terminus. Mrs. Davenant, who professed to find the country boring, paid frequent visits to town, leaving her two children in the care of her sister-in-law, who lived with them, and whose money Stephen had invested with his own in the property.

On this particular evening in October, the house lay asleep, all the inmates having retired, with the exception of Mr. Davenant. He was still up, going through accounts in his office by the light of a small standing reading-lamp. The room lay at the back of the house, some distance from the main part, being situated at the end of one wing. The house, a single-storied building, covered a good space of ground altogether. The living rooms of the family formed the front portion. Behind was a flagged court-yard, bordered by two long wings. In these wings were situated store-rooms and pantries, spare bed-rooms, bath-rooms, and Stephen's office. Detached from the main building was the kitchen, dairy and servants' quarters.

Further away were the stables and coach-houses, and still more remote, the men's hut.

Tramping along the road towards this last, a weary figure, dusty and ragged, his boots worn to the uppers, made his way. His face was covered with a growth of stubbly black beard. Round his left hand and fore-arm was swathed a dirty bandage, torn apparently from an old shirt. The man might have been taken for an ordinary sundowner or swagman, but that he carried neither swag nor blackened billy, the unfailing accompaniments of his tribe. His appearance suggested the men's hut as the most likely place wherein to seek accommodation for the night. But the man avoided it, keeping as far away from it as the track permitted, fearful lest an unseen eye might be on watch within. His actions, when approaching the house itself, were stealthy. He kept in the shadow, for, though the moon was clouded over, there remained sufficient light to reveal any moving object on the scene. Making his way cautiously past the out-buildings, he found all quiet. All was dark in the servants' quarters, also. Not a light glimmered from door or window save that in Davenant's office. With uncertain steps the man drew nearer, treading as noiselessly as his tired limbs would allow. As he stepped up on to the open verandah which ran around the wing, a board creaked, but he did not heed it. Through the glass of the French window he could see Stephen Davenant, pen in hand, busy over the figures in a ledger. He had, evidently, not been disturbed by the creaking board. A curious expression was on the traveller's face, while his gaze rested on the occupant of the room, all unconscious of the other's proximity. Turning the handle, he opened the door.

Startled at the click of the latch, Mr. Davenant turned and beheld the strange figure so unceremoniously introducing itself into his private sanctum. Dropping the pen, he slipped his right hand into the drawer of the writing table.

"Don't shoot, Steve! It's only me," said the man, in a hollow voice.

"And who are you, not—Wilfred!" he exclaimed. "What do you want? Is it more money?"

"No." He spoke feebly, the other observed.

"What are you here for then? We thought you were dead."

"I dare say you are sorry I'm not. I can't pretend I thought you'd be overjoyed to see me," and he grinned through his stubble of beard.

"What has brought you here, and at this hour?" inquired the other, ignoring the man's bitter words.

"To ask you to give me a chance."

"Haven't you had chances? Splendid ones." Davenant told him coldly. "And what's been the good?"

"I know I'm a rotter, I admit it, so you needn't bother to rub it in. I mightn't have come at all if I hadn't been in a hole," the man said.

Davenant looked at him suspiciously. "In trouble with the police again, I suppose?" he queried, bitterly.

"Something of the sort—perhaps better not inquire. Better for your own sake if you don't know too much, perhaps."

Davenant looked the disgust he felt. "You've always been a disgrace to the family, Wilfred, and always will be," he said.

The other man saw the glance of scorn flung at him. "I tell you I admit it," he groaned, wearily. "I've done crowds of things I've been ashamed of, things that won't bear thinking of by decent people, and I've taken my gruel without grumbling. I'm not grousing about it. But this time it's different. I'm being laid on to for what I never did. I'm innocent this time as a new born babe, Steve, I swear it."

"Well, if you're innocent, what are you afraid of?" asked the other.

"I can't prove it, and that's the hellish part. They've had it in for me a long time, and now they think they've

got me. And the evidence will all tell against me. That's the whole damned mess up."

"Is it very bad?" inquired Davenant.

"About as bad as they make 'em. If they get me it may be the rope."

"And you come here to me! to my house! —— Really, Wilfred, I don't know how you can have the face. Sometimes it's hard to believe the same parents bore us. To think the same Davenant blood runs in your veins as in the rest of us!" and he paced the room, keeping his eyes turned from his disreputable brother as if loth to acknowledge the relationship. Then, as his eye caught the bandaged limb.

"What's the matter with your hand?" he demanded.

"Rather nasty burn—better not want to know how I got it," was the answer.

"What in the name of heaven you expect me to do for you I can't imagine," exclaimed Stephen.

"Give me a chance."

"What's the good? You'll only make me regret it."

"No, I swear by God I won't," the man said, earnestly. "Only give me a chance this time, Steve, and I swear I'll not go back on you. For the sake of our dead mother don't send me to hell!"

"How dare you speak of her? You broke her heart."

The man reeled where he stood, only saving himself from falling by making a clutch at the heavy writing table.

"Sorry, Steve, but I'm starving," he said, feebly, as the other pushed a chair forward for him. "I've been dodging and hiding ever since the—ever since it happened, afraid to come out by daylight for fear of being copped. I hadn't anywhere to go where I could lose myself, so I came here."

As he took in the meaning of the other's words, Stephen's face grew slowly paler.

"So it's you they're after," he whispered, in horrified tones. "Why, man, the whole country s being scoured, and your description is being published everywhere!"

"I know."

"And you come here to me! My God! To think it's my own brother they're after," Davenant said, bitterly.

"Didn't recognise the description, did you?" Wilfred asked, sarcastically.

"How could I? How could anyone connect you with me?"

"Just so! That's why I sneaked round here—thought it'd be the least likely place they'd look for me."

"You never did think of anyone but yourself," his brother told him. "What am I to say to Kitty and Nell?"

"Don't say anything. Nell's all right, bless her. I won't trouble Kitty more than I can help. She was always a bit of a snag."

"She's my wife and mistress of this house. Remember that, please!"

"You know she never did like me."

"Can you wonder?" Steve asked, coldly. "After the way you behaved."

"She was as hard as nails on me. It's down and out with Kitty." He spoke hopelessly.

"She's a good woman, and if I let you stay at Bunglatta you'll have to treat her with respect. I'll trouble you not to forget that!" severely.

"I won't forget that, Steve, and if I'd had a good woman to keep me straight, God knows, I might have been rich and respectable like you, instead of being the low down, crawling thing I've sunk to." Then, in a last desperate appeal, "Won't you give me a chance? You can't stand by and see your own brother end his life on the gallows!"

For answer Davenant opened the cupboard of a small sideboard and, producing a plate of cheese and half a small loaf, set the food before the starving man.

Though he was accounted a hard man, Stephen refrained from reminding his brother that, for a desperate man, there is another way to rid himself from the burden of life than by way of the gallows. Perhaps memories of former days, when they had played together as boys, swept across his mental vision. Anyhow, he sat in silence while Wilfred ate ravenously to the last morsel.

"You don't happen to have any liquor handy, I suppose?" he said, drawing a long breath, when he had finished.

"I'm a teetotaller," the other told him. "After your example I'm not going to have my boy ruined by drink."

"Oh!"

"And if I let you stay on here you've got to give up the drink, too, Wilfred. I won't have you at Bunglatta on any other condition." His voice was stern.

The other hastened to agree to his brother's terms, realising that his only hope now lay in complying with all Stephen's "fads," as he regarded them.

"That's all right, old man. I'll take the pledge, too, if you insist. I'm in earnest all right this time, Steve—deadly earnest. I'm like a ship going to pieces on the rocks, and it's you've hold of the life line. You let go and I sink."

As he rose from his seat he looked down at the rags that did duty for body covering.

"What about these duds?" he asked.

"I'll have to hunt up some things for you till you can get clothes of your own. These'll have to be burnt, somehow, on the quiet. Come along to the bathroom," and, taking up the lamp, he led the way out of the French window and along the verandah. "Tread softly and don't wake the others."

Next morning there was great excitement in the nursery, when it was known that Uncle Wilfred had come the previous night, and was occupying the small spare room next Dad's office.

"I call Steve very foolish to overlook all the harm Wilfred has done him," Mrs. Davenant said, severely, when she went to inform her sister-in-law of the prodigal's return.

"Perhaps poor Wilfred has been more sinned against than sinning," Nell answered, anxious to find some mitigation of her younger brother's conduct. "And you say he has promised to turn over a new leaf, Kitty?"

"Pouf! new leaf! How many new leaves do men of his sort turn over in their lives and leave a stain on every one of them? It's my opinion that brother of yours is past redemption, and I for one wouldn't trust him farther than I could see him." She pursed her lips in disgust, expecting protest, but Nell, who never argued with her sister-in-law, kept silence.

She supposed it likely that Steve had told his wife more of the scandal that hung round Wilfred's name than had ever come to her own ears. She knew he was the black sheep of the family, and hoped with Stephen that he had taken himself off to America or South Africa for good, no rumour of his doings having reached them for some years now. Consequently, the sudden appearance of the prodigal from the underworld was, to say the least, upsetting. Their quiet, orderly household life was being threatened by this alien intruder. Into what niche could he be fitted? And if by his own conduct he was incapable of fitting in anywhere, what might the result be? Nell tried not to give way to forebodings..

CHAPTER VII.

The New Uncle.

After all, it was left to the tender hands of little children to make smooth the rough places in the Davenant menage, that arose from the advent of the unwanted member of the family. Teddy and Tottie adopted Uncle Wilfred without any misgivings. It was such fun to possess a new grown-up uncle all to themselves.

"He's nobody else's uncle, is he, Auntie Nell? Only Teddy's and mine," demanded Tottie. Being satisfied on this point, she straightway began to be sorry for the other children of her acquaintance who possessed no Uncle Wilfred.

"I'm going to call you Uncle Bill. I like it better than Wilfred," announced Teddy, one day.

"Not on your life, you don't," said his uncle so fiercely that the boy's mouth puckered ready to burst into tears. The man, to soothe him, took him on his knee and told him he once knew a bad, bad man named Bill, and had hated the name ever since.

An unobtrusive member of the household was Miss Louise Homfrey, the governess, a languid eyed, soulful creature who adored Gordon's poems, or professed to. She wore clinging gowns and walked with a studied slowness of movement that was more a glide than an ordinary walk. She was sinuous and graceful, a contrast to the children's mother, who was rather on the stout side, a fleshy woman of the large, fair and managing type. Miss Homfrey wore her black hair in fluffy curls well over her face, which looked smaller in consequence.

Wilfred felt afraid of the governess at first and gave her a wide berth. Nell and the children were his chief companions, and with them he was at his best and free from the haunting fear of discovery.

"It's my birfday to-morrow—and I'm having a birfday party," Tottie informed him one day. "And Mollie and Annie Wilcocks are coming, and Joan Fetherston." There was a moment's silence while Wilfred mastered his voice.

"Who's Joan Fetherston?" he asked then.

"Didn't you never see her? She's the favouritest grown up person I know. I love her nearly as much as I love Auntie Nell."

"She's nicer than Auntie Nell," asserted Teddy.

"She's not! Auntie Nell's the nicest Auntie in the whole world, so there!" Tottie cried, indignantly, and only Wilfred's strong right arm checked a miniature combat. The raised voices brought his sister into the room.

"I'm trying to prevent your little champion from committing murder, or being murdered herself, Nell," he laughed. "And I've only one hand to do it with, so please come to my assistance."

The girl soon had peace restored. "It's sweet of Tottie," she told her brother. "She won't let anyone be compared with me. All the same, Joan Fetherston is a dear. You'll think her charming, I know. She and I have been the greatest friends since we were at school together," and she explained to him where Miss Fetherston's property was and all about Joan and Mrs. Robson, and how Windfells was worked for her by a capable manager—a splendid man. But she omitted to mention his name.

"I wish Joan was my auntie," observed Teddy, listening to Nell's eulogy of her friend.

"I wish she was my mother," Tottie declared. "I don't want any other auntie but you."

"Stupid," jeered her brother. "Who'd you have for a daddy if Joan was your mother?"

"I'd have Mr. Rawlins," Tottie replied, triumphantly.

"Yah! silly, you couldn't! He'd have to marry Joan to be your daddy then, wouldn't he, Auntie Nell?"

"He can marry Joan, can't he?" she turned to demand her aunt's assent. "Why, Auntie Nell, your face is all red," she announced. "You look so pretty like that."

Nell caught up the child, and using her as a shield from Wilfred's eyes, said, "What silly things you children do talk about," and it was some moments before she turned and faced the room.

"Miss Homfrey's made me a birfday cake with pink and white sugar all over it," Tottie informed her uncle, "and she's made six little sugar miee to sit round the edge, because I'll be six years old to-morrow."

"And she's made a sugar pussycat, with cloves for eyes, sitting on top, and I've tug it to eat," interrupted Teddy.

"You shan't have it—it's mine," cried Tottie. "Isn't it my very own birfday-cake, Auntie Nell?" and tears were about to flow.

"Of course it's yours, dearest. But neither of you must eat the pussy. If you do, the little mice will eat up all your cake, and then what will you do?" and the trouble was averted.

Wilfred hardly listened to the children's further talk till Miss Fetherston's name was again mentioned.

"Joan's promised to bring me something nobody's ever, ever seen before," Tottie told him. "What d'you think it's going to be, Uncle Wilfred?"

"I can't guess. Is it something to eat? Lollipops, perhaps."

"But lollies is made of things people's seen before," Tottie pouted.

"Well, we must just have patience till she comes, little woman. When's she to be here?"

"To lunch," Nell told him. "Tottie's nearest little friends, Mollie and Annie Wilcocks, are to be here soon after breakfast. Miss Homfrey will take them all for a drive to the settlement to see old Biddy, who used to be the children's nurse. After lunch we are all going to drive

to the bridge paddock for an afternoon tea picnic. In the evening we're going to have a dance in the school-room."

"It sounds jolly. Are you going to invite me to your party, Tot?" Wilfred asked.

"Of course you're coming," cried the child. "What are you going to give me, Uncle Wilfred?"

"I'm awfully sorry, my pet, but I haven't anything you'd care for. As soon as this hand of mine's better, I'll make you something," he promised.

"What'll you make me?" and she clambered on to his knee, and, flinging her soft little arms about his neck, rubbed her rosy baby cheek against his own.

"I'll make you a card-board man that can move his arms and legs, and cows, and sheep, and horses, and little fences for a stockyard, and all sorts of things," her uncle promised.

"Will you make me a bow and arrow, Uncle Wilfred?" broke in Teddy, who had come across the room to listen to his uncle's list of promised treasures. "I don't want things made of paper," he said, contemptuously.

"Yes, and I'll make you a pop-gun, if you can find a piece of bamboo, and an old cork."

The children claimed his attention till Miss Homfrey called to him to help her in decorating the school-room for the following evening's dance. They would not have time in the morning, she said, and soon all were busy cutting great sprays of green stuff and twining long wreaths which, under the governess's direction, were arranged in festoons around the walls and over doors and windows.

"I hope this work doesn't hurt your injured hand—or is it your arm?" inquired Miss Homfrey, sympathetically.

"No—not at all," Wilfred assured her, hoping she had not seen him wince when, during their efforts, a picture had fallen from its place, and to save it, he had caught it on his injured limb.

"You got it hurt in a fall from your bicycle, I hear?" Miss Homfrey said, interrogatively.

Wilfred wondered if this was the cause alleged by his brother for his injury. Presuming it must be, from the governess's question, he replied in the affirmative.

"Have you got a bicycle, Uncle Wilfred?" asked Teddy, at once, eager to try his own skill.

"Not just at present, Teddy—I—gave it away," he finished, awkwardly Miss Homfrey thought.

"Who to?" demanded the boy.

"To a friend—you mustn't be so inquisitive, my boy," his uncle said.

"Children do ask awkward questions sometimes, don't they?" Miss Homfrey laughed, gently.

Wilfred looked at the governess's face, but it was as dreamy and placid as usual, her soulful dark eyes veiled by the long, black lashes.

When he was alone with his sister, Wilfred asked her a question that had taken root in his mind, and made him uneasy.

"Has Miss Homfrey been here long?"

"About a year and a half, I think," was her answer, at which he breathed again. There was no connection, then, between her and the detective police. Still, he felt that something of mystery hung about the girl.

"Did Kitty or Steve know her before they engaged her?"

"No. I think Kitty heard of her through a friend in town. Why do you ask?"

"She is a very beautiful woman," Wilfred asserted. "It's not usual to see such a girl buried away in the bush."

"I'm afraid I can't admire her as much as you seem to do. I'll show you my idea of beauty," and Nell went to her room, returning the next minute with a small photograph cut down from cabinet size, evidently to fit

some frame. She placed it in her brother's hand. "There," she announced, triumphantly.

"I—don't—know—her." The man tried to keep his voice steady, though he could see the little photo. shake in his trembling fingers.

"You have not met her yet, but you will soon. That's my friend, Joan Fetherston. It's not a very recent one. It was taken when she was eighteen."

It was the same smiling countenance that could look the world in the face fearlessly. Younger and more irresponsible than the girl who had met and held her own against the shearers' delegation—but the same. The little tendril curls caressing the smooth brow, the sweet curve of the laughing lips, and the brave, honest eyes! He did not know how long he gazed, but he started when Nell spoke to him. He felt he could have gazed for hours and then have been still unsatisfied.

"Well! what do you think of her? Is she not as pretty as Miss Homfrey?"

"Ye-es! I suppose you'd call her rather pretty."

Nell snatched the little photograph from his hand. "I'm sorry I showed it to you, Wilfred. You don't half appreciate her," and she bore it indignantly back to her room.

Her brother followed, full of apologies, and stood at the door while she opened an old photograph album on a table and replaced the little likeness between the pages.

CHAPTER VIII.

Tottie's Birthday.

Joan drove herself over to Bunglatta on Tottie's birthday. She would have had Rawlins's company only that the manager could not leave. Offers had been received from neighbouring station owners, placing their shearing sheds at his disposal, and he had arranged to carry through the remainder of the work at once. Some of his men agreed to stay on and finish their contract. Some refused, claiming extra pay on account of the cancelling of the agreement through the destruction of the shed. Some of these last threatened proceedings against Miss Fetherston for breach of contract. But none of these things had power to depress the girl on this glorious morning, and she was looking forward with pleasant anticipations to her visit.

She was feeling quite recovered. A recently experienced sense of averted death, giving as it were a new lease of life, raised in her soul the spirit of gratitude to a merciful Providence for having spared her. She looked out on the world with new eyes, and found it very beautiful. It was, indeed, good to be alive on this glorious spring morning. Life had become more precious because so nearly lost.

With the gaiety of a child, singing at her occupation, Joan hunted through cupboards and drawers for the present she had in mind to give Tottie. A fancifully decorated biscuit tin caught her eye. The odds and ends it held were emptied out, and, going to the store-room, she filled the box with nuts of all sorts—walnuts, filberts, soft-shell almonds, and others.

Tying bits of gay ribbon round the smallest pair of nut-crackers she possessed, she laid them on top, wrapping the whole in brown paper and labelling it "A present from Joan."

Aunt Lavinia's doll was already packed in its box. Various other packages, including a box of cracker bonbons from herself, embroidered silk handkerchiefs and a dancing-doll, obtained from Goon Khan, the hawker, from the domestics at Windfells, and a wonderful bucking donkey in a cart that performed when wound up, from Rawlins, were included in her load.

"I feel like Father Christmas," Joan said, carefully stowing away the goods into the pony cart. "Only I should have a pair of reindeer to draw me instead of Dorothy and Martha."

Rawlins tucked the rug round her knees, raising his hat as she drove away.

The sun had not risen very high yet, for Joan was making an early start in the freshness of the morning. She wished to reach Bunglatta by noon, and it was a long drive. The ponies objected to being pushed beyond their ordinary pace, even if it did happen to be Tottie Davenant's birthday. So the girl let them trot along at the steady pace to which they were accustomed. She met few people on the road. Those she passed were generally known to her at least by name. In the country a stranger becomes an object of interest, if not suspicion. An occasional swagman greeted her with a sideways nod. She addressed these by name also, for "humping their bluey," has become a profession with these gentlemen of the road, and the same station or farm sees the same "swaggies" arrive and depart at regular periods in rotation. There is a curious unwritten law that forbids one "swaggie" to jump the beat of his brother in the profession.

Some distance from Windfells, she overtook a traveller with swag on back and billy in hand, too young to belong to the regular begging type of swagman. Drawing closer, she recognised one of her own shearers, who had taken his departure a few days previously. He raised a shaky hand to arrest her attention. Pulling up, she noticed the bloodshot eyes and quavering limbs, and saw in the poor creature the victim of a recent drinking bout.

"D'ye think ye could gi' me summat, Miss?" he asked, in a thick voice. "I 'aven't a penny to take 'ome."

His hand rested on the wheel of her pony cart to balance his swaying body.

"Surely Mr. Rawlins paid you off before you left. What have you done with your cheque, Kennedy?" she asked, pity and repulsion warring within her.

"Knocked it down at the pub."

"How much did your earnings amount to? I know Mr. Rawlins considered you a good worker," the girl told him.

"A tenner," the man admitted.

"You spent ten pounds in drink. Oh! Kennedy, how could you?" She could not conceal her disgust at his confession. He attempted no excuse.

"Can't ye gi' me a trifle, Miss? Me troat's like 'ell."

"Why didn't you stay on? Perry and some of the others agreed to stay on and finish. Go back now. Tell Mr. Rawlins I sent you," she urged. "He'll take you on again, I'm sure."

A cunning leer crossed the poor wretch's drink-sodden countenance.

"Couldn't scab on the Union, Miss," he mumbled. "Wouldn't be a scab, not for nobody. Gi' us a couple o' bob, lady."

"Have you a wife?" the girl asked.

"Yes."

"And family?"

"Three children, Miss."

"How are you going to face your poor wife? What will you tell her when she asks where your earnings have gone?" Joan felt she might as well talk to the gum trees on either side of the road as to this swaying creature, clutching at her wheel, and whining for a dole.

"Dunno, Miss. Can't ye gi' me summat?"

She felt he was beyond the reach of argument, lost to all sense of shame, reduced to the lowest depths to which a normally decent man can descend.

The glad October sunlight shimmered on the landscape. In the crisp air could be felt the stirring call to the brave of heart, the call to go forth and conquer. The promised reward to the victor in the fight, of joy and wealth, and happiness, of rich reward to those who strive, may be attained by any man in this golden land—and yet —Joan groaned in her heart at the pity of it, at this poor, deluded wretch, chained down to hopeless poverty by fetters of folly forged by himself! And nothing could open his be-fogged eyes to the truth of it! He must live on, blind to the end. Such is the law of this old world of ours, and such is the nature of man.

The girl took out a half-sovereign and held it towards him. He clutched at it, staggering as he let go his hold of the cart, spat on it for luck, and scarcely thanking her, lurched onward in the direction of the nearest public-house. The incident saddened her for a while. The suffering and sorrow of the universe spread themselves like a pall before her mental vision, shutting out the sunshine she had basked in previously.

Not for long, though. She was too young, too untouched by trouble as yet, too newly-born to life and happiness to allow the shadow to cloud her heart. Driving through the crisp morning air, watching the long, red road unrolling before her—there seemed interminable miles of it—through sparse settlement, a newly-awakened spirit sprang to life within her. The beauty and freedom of the bush lay around, uplifting her above the earth, above sordid worries. She gloried in the fact that she was here in the open country, where no walls could shut her in. She felt a rush of pity for the prisoners, shut away from God's sunlight, even though their own crimes have placed them there. She wondered what had become of Bill Dawson. He deserved to be behind prison walls if ever any man did. She wondered how long the police would take to track him down, for she never doubted but that he would be

caught and punished in time. There was to be a reward offered for information that would lead to his arrest. Even supposing he had friends who were willing to hide him, a hundred pounds was a tempting bribe.

Paddocks on both sides of her in a continuous succession came and were left behind. Browsing cattle looked up curiously as she passed. Vacant-eyed sheep started, scuttled a short distance, stopped and resumed their interrupted nibbling at the short, sweet spring grass pushing its green spikes up through the dried winter herbage.

Peace and content were writ largely over the scene, even if the latter were falsified by the eternal discontent that ever lurks in but half concealed corners of our land. Who could help being happy? Joan had but one wish, she told herself, to be supremely happy. She wanted a mate —another human being with whom to share her happiness. The wild parrots had left the flock and flew in pairs. Joan heard the harsh cries of those on the wing, and the whistling monotone of the birds at rest in the tall gums, busily feeding on the gum blossom. All Nature cried out to her, "It is not good for man to live alone." And the girl longed for a companion to speak to, someone to share her solitude, someone to love.

Had Rawlins been with her to-day, and again put the question she had left unanswered, there is little doubt what her anwer would have been. She regretted now that she had not answered differently. She feared he was hurt, suffering at this very moment, perhaps, on account of her half rejection, or at any rate, non-acceptance of his love. She hoped he did not really think her indifferent. She began to reproach herself for having treated him so badly. She would have given anything at that moment for a means of communicating with him to let him know beyond all doubt that she loved him. Had such a thing as the telephone been available she would have sought that means of setting his mind at rest. In the days of which this story tells, however, the telephone had not penetrated far from the centres of population. The Government of the day cared little for the inhabitants of the out-back parts of the

State. A few of the more enterprising among the settlers laid on the telephones at their own expense, to communicate with the nearest country exchanges, Stephen Davenant being one who did so. In these days, when every little dairy farm in the Ranges has its own telephone wire running from stump to stump across miles of mountainous country, it is strange to look back on the time, less than 20 years ago, when such facilities were unknown. How many valuable lives have been lost because the summoning of the doctor entailed a long, stiff ride through boggy roads. The toll of the little ones in the out-back has been a sad and cruel one. Such a loss can never be made up in our great land, with its empty spaces crying out for population. The remedy has been found after years of neglect by the practical suggestion of the clever wife of one of our Governor-Generals, who instituted the Bush Nursing Society.

There being no telephone by means of which Joan could let Tom Rawlins know of her changed feelings, the course of more lives than one was materially altered, whether for better or worse, who can say? One moment of impulse may make or mar a human life.

Joan, longing for companionship, beheld on the red gravelled road, some distance ahead, an old canvas-hooded gig, drawn by a scarecrow of a horse. It fairly rattled as it trundled along. Shabby and dilapidated though the turn-out was, with rents torn in the hood, and the leather hanging from the back in long strips, Joan hailed it with delight. To her it was a welcome sight. She loved children as all healthy-minded young women should, and she could see seated in the gig, three small figures who, on nearer approach, proved to be the son and daughters of a selector some miles back. They were driving themselves to school, as they did every morning, and to reach it in time were obliged to rise very early. Joan had risen early in order to arrive at Bunglatta by noon, but these little bush children, with their slow going old "moke," were up still earlier daily.

Joan slowed down as she overtook the strange conveyance.

"Off to school?" she cried, gaily.

Three rosy little faces peeped shyly at her.

"Ye-es, Miss."

Then one, more daring, added, "Daddy's got a new cow, an' 'er name's Disy."

Joan drove on, her thoughts arrested by the child's speech. What kind of schooling was this, she wondered, which allowed these poor little innocents to murder their mother-tongue? Should not the Government, or, at least, the Minister for Education, see to it that no teacher be permitted to innoculate the young Australian with the virus of such hideous pronunciation? All who undertake the instruction of youth should be obliged to pass an examination in the English language proper, the beautiful tongue made glorious by Shakespeare's genius. But what use to look to Government, when frequently the very men in it, responsible for our education system, were unaware of its short-comings? Whether the Australian-born lacks a musically attuned ear, or whether the faculty of distinguishing sounds lacks cultivation, the fact remains, and the native from our shores proclaims his nationality in his speech.

Joan had an inspiration. Why not tackle the task ourselves, instead of blaming the Government? She pulled up at a junction where the school road turned off, and waited for the slowly approaching gig.

"What did you say you called Daddy's new cow?" she called out brightly, as they drew up alongside.

"Disy, Miss!" from three healthy young throats.

"Can you spell it for me?" proceeded Joan.

The two younger put a shy finger in their mouths and stared at the pretty lady. The eldest, a girl, spelt out the word confidently.

"But that's called Daisy!" and she made each in turn repeat it after her.

"All cows like to be called by their proper names, don't they?" she laughed. "And if you say it properly Daisy

will give Daddy much better milk, you know.'' The three bonny faces laughed back at the pretty lady who said such funny things. ''Don't be late for school,'' she admonished, gathering up the reins preparatory to moving on.

''Don't care if we are, Miss. Teacher won't mind,'' they told her, eagerly, unwilling to bring to an end such an absorbing conversation.

''Who is your teacher?'' Joan asked.

Three shrill voices responded as one, but the girl could make nothing of it. One sound resembled ''Meen,'' one ''Mane,'' and the third and most dominant, ''Marn.''

''Spell it,'' she suggested.

Again the elder girl volunteered. ''Hem, he, haitch, hay, hen!''

''Oh! Mehan,'' Miss Fetherston made a bold guess. ''And what does she teach you?''

''Readin', writin', an' sums.''

''She learns me more'n she learns Vivian and Gladys,' added the elder girl. ''She learns me grammar an' spellin' 'swell,'' she announced, proudly.

''Wot's them called?'' asked the boy, pointing a grubby little finger at Joan's ponies.

''Martha and Dorothy. What's the name of your steed Vivian?'' inquired Miss Fetherston.

''Grice.''

''Grace!'' surveying the animated bag of bones between the gig-shafts. ''Well, take care she doesn't run away with you.''

The remark touched young Australia on the raw.

''Daddy says as Grice wur a rice-'orse wanst!'' the boy burst out, vehemently. ''They was agoin' ter run 'er in the Melbourne Cup, only her took lime.''

''Indeed! Well, good-bye, children! Don't be late for school,'' and she drove on with a full appreciation of the buyer's comment to the horse dealer, displaying the qualities of his animal. ''Waal, I admit it's got points, but I ain't wantin' to buy a hat rack.''

CHAPTER IX.

A Picnic.

Joan reached Bunglatta shortly after noon, and Tottie was on the look out for her arrival. Her appearance was hailed with a whoop from the children, who rushed to meet her, almost tumbling over each other in their excitement.

She kissed Tottie, and wished her many happy returns of the important occasion, piling the eager little arms with the numerous parcels she unpacked from the cart. For Teddy she had brought a big box of chocolates. Leaving her ponies in charge of the groom, she turned to greet Nell, who had come out to welcome her, summoned by the shouts of the delighted little ones. Arm linked in arm they entered the school-room, where already Tottie was busy opening and admiring sundry presents brought from out their paper wrappings.

"What an awful litter!" It was Miss Homfrey's slow drawl, as she came in to find her tidy school-room scattered over with paper and string. In her hands she bore some more greenery for decorating.

"How pretty the room looks," was Joan's greeting. "You and the children must have worked hard."

"Mr. Davenant did the hardest part," replied Miss Homfrey.

"Daddy didn't do none of it. It was Uncle Wilfred," Teddy said, in explanation. "You'll just love Uncle Wilfred, Joan. He's bonza!"

"Oh—oh! Wot a boo-ti-ful dolly!" gasped Tottie, delightedly, when, assisted by the little Wilcocks children, she had freed "Lavinia" from her packings of tissue paper, and taken her tenderly from her box. "I'm going to call her Joan!" she announced.

"But she has a name already, darling. It's here on the box. See, it's Lavinia."

"Don't like Lavinia. I like Joan."

"But, Tottie, dear, Aunt Lavinia would be hurt if she heard you say that. She hoped you'd call it after her."

The child ruminated a moment on the difficult problem of pleasing both herself and the donor of the doll. "I know," she announced, in a satisfied tone. "When she comes here I'll call her 'Lavinia,' other times I'll call her 'Joan.'" The three children were not long in discovering the delightful fact that the clothes came to "take off," and soon the tiny garments were on the floor, adding to the litter strewn there.

"I haven't seen your special present yet, Joan. What nobody's never seen," Tottie said, as she cut the string and slowly undid the mysterious parcel. "Hasn't nobody never seen that?" she asked, viewing the gay tin box.

"O, yes. You've got to look inside," Joan told her.

Opening the lid, she exclaimed, joyfully. "What pwetty 'ittle crackers. Hasn't nobody never seen those?"

"Go on," laughed Joan. "What do you use crackers for?"

Taking a nut from the box, Miss Fetherston solemnly cracked it, and placed it in the child's hand, shutting the little fingers upon it.

"Now, look inside that shell, and you'll see what nobody's ever seen before," she told her.

With a scream of delight the child ran off to show her mother the box that Joan had brought, and to explain how clever she was to bring her something no one had ever seen.

Miss Homfrey took charge of the bon-bon crackers.

"They'll come in for this evening," she said. "They'll do for dressing up."

"Uncle Wilfred's going to live with us always," Teddy announced to Joan, later. "Did you know he'd come home?"

"Yes. You must be glad to have your brother back," she said to Nell. She did not know much about this

brother, though she had been told there was a black sheep in the Davenant family, a ne'er-do-well, who had disappeared years ago, nobody knew where, though rumours cropped up now and then of wild doings in other parts, in which Wilfred Davenant was mixed up.

She knew Nell first at school in Melbourne, whither she had been sent by her father for twelve months, to be finished. The friendship formed there was not ended with their school-days, and when Stephen Davenant became the owner of Bunglatta, both girls rejoiced that they would live within easy reach of one another. Though communication between the two homes was fairly frequent, Nell had never voluntarily mentioned her younger brother's name, and Joan felt some hesitation in pursuing the subject even now, finding her friend disinclined to talk of him.

"I don't know, and that's the truth," Nell answered, in reply to the other's question. "I ought to be glad—very glad—to know he's safe here, when we have so often feared he might come to grief among wild companions. But Steve, I know, was very worried when he first came back. I think he is more hopeful lately."

"Is he likely to remain at Bunglatta?" Joan asked.

"I think probably Steve will let him stay on. He finds him useful. I'm glad to say, whatever Wilfred's faults may be, he's not afraid of work, and he seems to know how to manage the men. Steve says he's first rate at it, and can get more work out of them than Oliver, the overseer, ever could. Oliver wanted a holiday, so Steve is letting Wilfred take his place while he's away."

The subject dropped as the lunch-gong called them to the dining-room. Here Joan was introduced to Mr. Wells, a young Englishman and distant cousin of Mrs. Wilcocks, a jackeroo on their station. He had driven the children over, and had been urged by his cousin to make himself agreeable to Nell Davenant, as she was a "catch," and had money of her own.

Young Wells had been intended for the army, but his private means, being insufficient to meet the expenses con-

nected with the profession, gave it up and came to seek his fortune in Australia. In appearance he was insignificant looking, of short stature, and weedy build, but geniality beamed from his weak-chinned countenance. He wore a monocle, and could sit his horse like a jockey. His place at the table was opposite Joan, from whom he never took his eyes. His introduction to the girl knocked the stuffing out of him, as he confided to Mrs. Wilcocks afterwards.

Whatever effect it had, it did not dull his wits. Joan confessed she never enjoyed a jollier meal than that lunch at Bunglatta, and certainly Bertie Wells was responsible for more than half its success.

"Wilfred won't be in to lunch," Steve told his wife, as they sat down to the table. "He's gone to the six-mile this morning. Simon's not looking after the fences at all well, lately. Wilfred is finding numbers of gaps. It's no wonder sheep are missing."

"I'm glad Wilfred is of some use to you," was Kitty's comment.

Tottie was on the verge of tears at his absence. "I wanted Joan to see Uncle Wilfred," she whimpered, but Miss Homfrey's quietly spoken: "Tottie, if you're going to be naughty, I'll send you to the nursery," checked her.

Joan certainly did not miss him. Bertie Wells saw to that. Perhaps the other grown-ups felt a certain amount of relief that the undesirable member of the family was absent.

After lunch the big wagonette was brought round to the door, and the party took their seats for the promised afternoon picnic to the bridge. Bertie Wells would have excused himself if he could have persuaded Miss Fetherston to stay behind with him. It was such a lovely afternoon for tennis, he urged, and living in the country she must get so awfully full up of driving. But Joan refused to disappoint the children, though she loved tennis, and would have enjoyed a game, so Bertie was perforce one of the party.

Arrived at the bridge paddock, Mrs. Davenant selected a shady spot for spreading the cloth. Steve said he preferred to sit in the wagonette and read his paper, while the rest prepared the tea. The children played "Tiggy Touch-wood," that is, Tottie and her two little friends did. Teddy said it was a silly girl's game, and he was going to help Mr. Wells make a fire and boil the billy.

Joan helped Kitty to unpack the baskets and spread the eatables on the cloth, while Miss Homfrey lounged in the shade or made a pretence of working at a piece of fine linen embroidery she had brought with her. From her coign of vantage she could keep an eye on all that went on around. What her thoughts were none but herself knew. She raised her eyes from her work to check an embryo quarrel between Tottie and her friends, then, folding it up and replacing it in her bag, she rose and strolled towards the improvised fireplace, where Bertie Wells and Teddy were getting themselves very black and smoky in their efforts to coax an obstinate billy to boil. Twice they had all but succeeded when the stick on which it rested gave way, upsetting the water and nearly extinguishing the fire, entailing extra tramps to the river for more water.

"I'm afraid you won't make a success of it that way," the governess told Bertie Wells. "Let me try," and, despite his protest she stooped and busied herself with the task.

"Too bad you should trouble, Miss Homfrey! Awfully stoopid of us not to be able to get the dashed pot to boil." But when, in response to her re-adjustment of the sticks, he saw the flame start afresh and lick around the billy—"Bai Jove!" he exclaimed. "That's awf'ly clayver of you, don't cher know." He was wiping the perspiration from his forehead with a silk handkerchief.

"Can't think how you manage to keep so cool, Miss Homfrey. Can't fancy you ever gettin' hot over anything. Look at me now," he added.

"Run away and help Miss Fetherston then," she commanded. "I'll look after the tea," and, nothing loth, Bertie did as he was told.

"Remarkably clayver woman that," he decided.

It was when all were gathered in a happy circle round the cloth, spread with dainty sandwiches and cakes, that a shout from Teddy's well-filled mouth made each head turn in the direction of his extended arm.

"Look, Mummie! Look, Daddy! There's Uncle Wilfred," and, still some distance away, was a horseman making his way leisurely along the road that must bring him within sight of their party. The childish treble was raised in a penetrating scream of "Uncle Wilfred! We're here! Come and have tea!"

"Be quiet, Teddy! You mustn't screech like that," his mother admonished, hoping the distance might prevent the child's voice carrying so far.

"Come over here! We're having tea, Uncle Wilfred!" was the only result of Kitty's reproof.

"Didn't I tell you not to scream to your uncle? He has no time to waste over us. He's busy doing work for Daddy. You're a very naughty boy to disobey me."

"I want Joan to see Uncle Wilfred," Teddy pleaded, in defence, as he dodged the hand he saw raised to enforce Mrs. Davenant's words.

It was not till those who were gazing at the object of the dispute felt certain that Wilfred, willing or unwilling, was obeying the call, and advancing towards the group, that Miss Homfrey thought it necessary to say—

"Teddy, you'll learn six verses of 'The Sick Stockrider' for me to-morrow."

"What for? I only called to Uncle Wilfred," protested the child.

"For disobeying your mother!"

The rider came slowly across the paddock to them, and dismounted.

Nell performed the introductions, seeing that her sister-in-law made no movement to do it. As Joan bowed in acknowledgment she beheld a sturdily built stranger of between thirty and forty—he might, by his face, have been

nearer the latter, so deeply lined was it. His hair was black, touched with grey at the temples. His clean shaved face, tanned by exposure, possessed regular features, and his mouth, though full lipped, hardly suggested the life rumour credited him with. A stoop of the shoulders took from his height. He was taller than Steve in reality, though the latter's upright carriage made the brothers appear of the same stature, and though Wilfred was the younger by five years, he might have passed for the elder of the two.

His eyes alone, Joan determined by her casual glance at the man, betokened the waster—the black sheep—as the world named him. They were, if not shifty, at least furtive. She felt the world's verdict was correct. She could never trust a man whose eyes were afraid to look her in the face. So much for the girl's first impressions.

What Wilfred saw was an angel from another sphere, draped in a little bit borrowed from God's own heaven, the drapery matching the colour of her eyes. That is how he thought of the blue coat and skirt the girl was wearing, cut by a leading Melbourne tailor. The white ostrich feather boa that circled her dainty throat he likened to a fleecy bit, astray from cloudland, that had reached the fairest resting-place on earth, which any cloud could choose.

Wilfred made no move to sit down, though Miss Homfrey made room for him between herself and Teddy. He stood apart, with his arm through the bridle, feeling, perchance, something akin to a fallen angel outside the gate of Paradise, gazing at joys from which he was for ever debarred.

Bertie Wells had leaped to his feet at the other's approach and, upon Nell's formal words of introduction, offered his hand genially.

"Awf'ly pleased, Mr. Davenant. So jolly meetin' like this, don't cher know—al fresco and all that sort of thing."

"Why don't you shake hands with Joan, too, Uncle Wilfred?" It was Tottie who spoke, and Miss Fetherston, half turning, as she rose on one knee to meet the hand withdrawn from Bertie's, was aware of coarse and rough-

ened fingers with the nails stubby and broken, but which clasped her own in a surprisingly gentle manner.

Miss Homfrey alone noticed the pallor that spread over the man's face at the contact.

Steve called to him to hang up his horse to a stump and join them, but failing to receive any encouragement from Kitty, Wilfred remained where he was.

"Thanks, I'm all right here. I can't stay long," he said, and just for a moment Joan fancied she must have met him before. It was the voice, deep-toned and vibrant, that struck a chord of memory. Next second she dismissed the idea. By no possible chance could she and this stranger, the ne'er-do-well of her friend's family, have ever crossed each other's path.

Nell saw that her brother's wants were attended to, supplying him with sandwiches and other eatables.

"I don't suppose you had any lunch," she said.

"No," answered Wilfred, and even Mrs. Davenant's conscience was stirred to remark that he must be hungry.

Bertie Wells handed him a cup of scalding tea, burning himself badly in the process. Forgetting that Wilfred could not take the cup from him till his good hand was free, Bertie held on to it by the bowl, while the other disposed of the sandwiches he had been supplied with.

"Bai Jove! That's rather on the warm side, don't cher know," he groaned, getting rid of it at last.

Miss Homfrey examined the hand, and, diving into her workbag produced the linen handkerchief she had been embroidering. Removing the needle she wound it round the injured hand.

"Keep the air from it, and when we get home I'll dress it for you," she told him.

"Thanks frightfully! Couldn't have believed it'd do that," he answered, gratefully.

Mrs. Davenant looked annoyed, and Nell felt that her sister-in-law blamed Wilfred, in her heart, for what had occurred.

It was later in the day, when the governess was engaged in bandaging the scalded hand with oil and cotton-wool, that Bertie remarked: "Bit of a waster that brother of Mr. Davenant's, what?"

"So it's said, but of course you see I'm not likely to hear much about it," she answered. Then, catching sight of young Teddy watching the operation with interested eyes, she changed the subject.

CHAPTER X.

The Birthday Cake.

There was "high tea" in the dining-room that evening in place of the usual nursery meal. The grown-ups joined the children on this occasion, Bertie Wells being again to the fore in keeping the ball rolling in the conversational line. He was full of lively small talk. He professed to have quite forgotten his damaged hand.

"It's nothin', I assure you," he said, in answer to Joan's inquiry. "And, since Miss Homfrey so kindly did the ministering angel business, I really don't feel it at all."

"Miss Homfrey's got the 'Amberlunch' medal," Tottie informed him.

As he failed to grasp the child's words, Nell translated. "She means St. John's Ambulance," she said, laughing.

"I must really congratulate Miss Homfrey on being an all-round genius," Bertie observed. "That handsome, and I can well believe delicious, birthday-cake, I see on the table, is also her work, I'm told, and I can vouch, from personal experience, she's A1 at making tea in a can."

Wilfred, whose glance was on the governess—he kept his eyes studiously removed from Joan, though he could have told her every word and movement—thought it strange that the compliment should induce an expression almost of contempt to flash from Miss Homfrey's eyes. It was gone in an instant, and her usual, rather bored expression, returned. No heightened colour betrayed that she had even heard the Englishman's flattering remark.

The meal went on with much hilarity, till the time arrived for the cutting of the cake. This delicate task was entrusted to Miss Homfrey. Her first proceeding was to remove the little sugar mice with the point of the knife, placing one on the plate of each child. There were two left.

"Give Joan a mice, too," pleaded Tottie.

"And Uncle Wilfred the other," added Teddy.

"And Auntie Nell," Tottie went on.

"There aren't any more," Miss Homfrey reminded them, as she struck the knife into the middle of the cake.

"Auntie Nell must have a mice!" Tottie exclaimed. "It's my birfday-cake."

"I don't want one, my pet," Nell said, gently.

"You can have mine—and I'll have the pussy," and the child magnanimously handed it to her.

"I'll have the pussy and Auntie Nell can have my mouse," Teddy burst out. "It isn't fair. I said first I'd have the pussy."

There were all the preliminaries of a nursery fracas when Miss Homfrey's voice broke in.

"Teddy—Tottie! I'll send you from the table if you don't behave."

"I do want pussy so much," murmured Tottie, not far off tears.

"So do I," Teddy maintained.

With a deft movement of her knife the governess severed the sugar animal in two, and laid one half on each of their plates. The tears and protests instantly ceased, quenched by the startling suddenness of the deed. Each gazed dumbly at the portion of the coveted object before them.

"Bai Jove! Judgment of Solomon, don't cher know. Cutest thing I've seen for a long time. Miss Homfrey, I congratulate you," Bertie announced.

Again no answering word fell from the lips of the governess. She might not have heard, for all the sign she gave.

The bon-bon crackers were kept till the end, a mild fusilade accompanying the process of opening them. The undoing and examining the contents and reading the enclosed mottoes amused the children for quite five minutes.

Paper hats, caps, and other adornments were discovered and donned by the children. Joan's contained a paper crown of green and gold, which Bertie Wells insisted on placing on her head. His own cracker revealed a sunbonnet which he wore unprotestingly at the youngster's request.

"You are Queen of the Revels, Miss Fetherston," he pronounced, bowing before her.

The soft light of the standing lamp, with its amber silk shade, played about her hair with a golden gleam. She looked regal in her primrose-colored dinner-frock, with its fichu of filmy lace caught together by deep, yellow roses. Round her throat she wore a string of amber beads. The crown of green and gold formed a fitting tribute to her beauty.

"What did you get, Uncle Wilfred?" Tottie had to repeat the question twice before the words reached his understanding. All the man's soul lay at the feet of Joan Fetherston in silent worship, and for the moment he was oblivious of all else.

"Eh! I haven't looked yet," he said, at last, when the raised voice recalled him to the present. Unrolling a tiny, tightly-folded black object, he held up a mask.

"What's it for?" queried Teddy.

"A burglar's mask," said the governess.

"Put it on, Uncle Wilfred. Put it on, do!" shouted the boy, gleefully.

"No, no." Wilfred pushed the thing from him, shrinking from this bit of shiny black paper with eye-holes and a hanging black fringe, as if it had been something fearsome.

"I will," exclaimed Tottie, joyfully seizing it, and with her chubby face hidden by the hideous black mask, she capered round the table, saying "boo" to frighten the others.

"You should say 'bail up!' shouldn't she, Uncle Wilfred? That's what robbers and bushrangers always say," Teddy informed her. As her uncle did not deny it, Tottie

had to go round again, ordering the various members to "bail up!" in what was intended for a gruff, manly tone, after which she had some more cake. It was then Teddy put a question.

"Daddy! What's a waster?"

"A person who wastes things, my son," Davenant replied.

There was a moment's silence, and then, "Why did Mr. Wells tell Miss Homfrey—ow—ow!" The question ended in a wail of anguish, for his cup of tea had upset itself all down his evening pants. It was not hot enough to scald his legs, but warm and wet and rather terrifying.

"Teddy, go to your room at once," the governess said, moving out his chair and deftly sliding him to the floor.

"I didn't do it!" wailed the child. "You must of knocked it over."

"That's the fault of having your cup too near the edge," the governess told him. "I've told you about it dozens of times."

The sobs grew fainter as the boy disappeared, and Nell, following Miss Homfrey out at the close of the meal, pleaded:

"You won't send him to bed, will you? It was only an accident.

"I know. I'm going to get him some fresh pants," was the answer.

"Bai Jove! a dooced clayver woman!" was Bertie's comment to himself.

CHAPTER XI.

Miss Homfrey's Discovery.

Tottie decreed that for the opening Lancers each dancer should be arrayed in paper headgear, even if they took them off afterwards. All complied, Uncle Wilfred under protest.

"I'm going to dance with you," the child told him, patronisingly. "And you mustn't let me fall on the slippery floor," she said, as she helped him to tie on his mask. "Oo! you is ugly, Uncle Wilfred," she cried, delightedly, as she surveyed the transformation she had effected.

Miss Homfrey, a jaunty glengarry, perched on her black tresses, presided at the piano. Nell, after vainly endeavouring to persuade Teddy, now respectable in a fresh suit, to lead out one of their little visitors, took him herself, while Mollie and Annie danced together. Mr. Wells, of course, claimed Joan for the first dance, leading her to the place of honor at the top of the room. Wilfred and Tottie faced them.

It was a hilarious performance. Tottie took charge, setting right any who deviated from the figures Miss Homfrey had taught them. Even Teddy, recovered now from his carefully nursed wrongs, capered and romped with the best of them.

Wilfred became reconciled to the hideousness of his own disguise as soon as he realised in it a means of feasting his eyes on the queenly figure of Joan Fetherston. Hitherto, he had but snatched stealthy glances, all too brief, when the girl was not looking his way. To-night, his face concealed by the mask, he could gaze his fill.

Joan scarcely deigned to notice her vis-a-vis, her whole attention being absorbed by her partner. In listening to his lively conversation she forgot everything except the

necessity of mechanically performing the evolutions demanded by the dance, giving her hand where the figure required it, and going through other set movements. She was enjoying it all thoroughly. Bertie was a capital partner, a good dancer, and an entertaining one. The girl's thoughts were entirely in the present. Her late terrible experience had been swept from her mind as an evil dream vanishes with morning light. Nothing was farther from her thoughts than the loss of Windfells' shearing shed, when the last figure was nearly at an end.

It was in the final grand chain, with which the dance terminates, that, in extending her hand for Wilfred to touch and pass on, she chanced to raise her eyes and met the man's. The full-fronted glance from the shadow of the mask startled her. The rest of his face was entirely concealed, the black fringe hiding the lower part having somewhat the appearance of a short beard.

Joan uttered an exclamation, stopping short. Thinking she was about to fall on the slippery boards, shiny now with the grated candle wax liberally sprinkled over them, Wilfred put out his arm to support her. But she shrank away from him in terror.

"What's the matter, Miss Joan?" her partner asked anxiously, as the music ended with a loud final chord.

"Nothing—only—please, Nell, ask your brother to remove that disguising mask. It put me in mind just now of that dreadful man who burnt our shed down."

With a violent gesture Wilfred tore it from his face, crushing it in his hand without speaking.

"Rather unpleasant to be reminded of that fellah," Bertie observed. "Specially as your police don't seem to be able to lay hands on him, in spite of the hundred pounds reward. May find the fellah poppin' up again any day, don't cher know. Seems to me nobody'll be safe till they nab the scoundrel."

Unable to listen longer, Wilfred left the school-room, nor did he return till Tottie, searching for him to come and dance with her, found him seated alone in a dark corner of

the verandah. It took all her coaxing to bring him back, and he all but fled a second time when Joan, fearing her words had hurt his feelings, made a pretty apology.

"I do hope you'll forgive my silly fancy, Mr. Davenant," she said. "I can't think what possessed me to think for a moment there was the slightest resemblance between you and Dawson."

He muttered something in reply, he never knew what, but the girl was apparently satisfied, for she danced the rest of the evening chiefly with Wells, as if she had not a care in the world to trouble her.

Wilfred danced with the little girls in turn, and with Nell and Miss Homfrey. The latter he found the most perfect dancer he had ever met, unusually perfect for an amateur. But, he reflected, had not Bertie Wells dubbed her an all-round genius?

The one person in the room whom Wilfred felt he dare not approach, was Miss Fetherston. It would seem like sacrilege to ask her to dance with him. He was only worthy to kneel at the feet of a woman like Joan. Bertie Wells, with his insignificant appearance and his laughable affectations, was far more worthy of the pure souled girl than himself.

"This is to be the very last dance, children," Miss Homfrey announced, "and then off you go to bed," and she sat down to play it.

"Uncle Wilfred, I'm going to have you," Teddy declared. "I haven't had you all the evening."

"Stupid! Men and boys don't dance together," Tottie exclaimed. "Do they?" appealing to her uncle.

"Never mind, Teddy. You and I shall dance this together," Wilfred told him, and, the music starting up at that moment, they were soon whirling round the room with all the exuberance of an opening dance, rather than the final one. Round and round they spun, urged on by Teddy to still greater efforts, as the music changed from waltz to polka, from polka to gallop.

Nell and Molly danced in a corner for safety. Tottie and Annie pranced all over the room, while Mr. Wells kept his partner to a limited circle in the centre of the floor. The dance was at its wildest, the noise and laughter loudest, when Wilfred felt something strike him, bringing him down with a crash to the floor, dragging Teddy with him, almost at Miss Fetherston's feet. A smothered oath escaped him as he picked himself up.

"Awf'ly sorry, old chap. Hope I didn't hurt you, but you tried to kill Miss Fetherston, you know—couldn't stand that."

What had happened was that Wilfred, in his endeavour to avoid knocking down the two children in one of Teddy's wild carcerings across the room, had all but cannoned into Wells and his partner. To save the girl, Bertie had, with a swift movement of his elbow, brought down Wilfred and the boy before they knew where they were. Joan was full of concern, so white and drawn had the man's face become.

"I'm afraid you are hurt, Mr. Davenant," she said, anxiously. "Your injured hand—did it suffer in the fall?"

"No—thanks—I'm not hurt at all. Please don't trouble about me."

"Off to bed, children," Miss Homfrey broke in. She had brought the music to an end when she heard the crash. "Run along to the drawing-room and say good-night, and then straight into bed. I'll come in ten minutes and put the lights out." Then, when she and Wilfred were left alone, "You are hurt all the same," she told him, in her slow, deliberate speech. He denied it strenuously, but his pallor belied his words.

"Let me bandage up your hand again. It's all coming undone," and she pointed to the loose end, disarranged by the vigour of the dance or the final descent on the floor. Protesting that he could do it himself, he tried to stop her, but she took possession of his injured member, and in a twinkling, laid bare the wound. "My gracious! what a burn! How on earth did you get it?" she asked, sharply.

He was shaking in her grasp like a man palsied with fear, or he would have been amazed at the change from her usual tones—quiet and sedately slow—which characterised the soulful eyed governess. She bit her lip with annoyance as soon as the exclamation was uttered, but saw, with relief, that her patient was in no condition to take notice of her slip.

She pushed him into a chair. "Sit down!" she commanded. "Your nerves have gone all to pieces, Mr. Davenant. Wait and I'll get you something."

She was gone but a minute. Returning with a tumbler containing sal-volatile, she made him drink it. "That's better," she said, as his self-control came back. "Now for the hand."

"I didn't hurt it in falling, really," he assured her, and she knew the pallor was not caused by physical pain, but by deadly fear.

"I must find out what Bertie Wells said to him," she said to herself, as she began to examine the burnt hand and arm for a deep, angry looking scar extended well up the forearm.

"I'm going to take charge of this," she said, aloud. "I'm good at doctoring, you know."

"So Wells told us." He spoke almost naturally again, and the trembling had left his limbs.

"His is nothing to yours. You'll have to be careful of this for a long time if you don't want it to turn to blood-poisoning. How did you say you got it?" she questioned again.

He had to find some kind of answer, and his brain seemed asleep. The thought that was uppermost in his mind was that she must never suspect the truth.

"A branding iron fell on it." He knew it was lame enough, but it was as good a reason as he could think of at the moment, and, if only she believed it, he would feel safe.

Miss Homfrey apparently had no suspicion that it was other than the truth, and began immediately to reprove him for cruelty to animals.

"You men never think of the sufferings of the poor dumb creatures," she told him, and she forthwith proceeded to convey her own views on vivisection and other matters, until he forgot to feel any anxiety as to his own safety at her hands. As she finished the dressing and secured the bandage, he thanked her quite humbly for bestowing so much of her time and trouble on him.

"Come to me every day," she ordered, as he bade her good-night, "and I'll guarantee to have it cured in a week or two, and if you won't come to me"—she paused.

"Yes?" interrogatively, turning as he reached the door. She smiled a confident farewell. "Then I'll have to come to you," she finished.

In spite of the day's unpleasant episodes, its pleasures far out-weighed its anxieties, Wilfred told himself. The meeting with Joan would stand out ever as a joyful remembrance. He could never forget a single word the girl addressed to him. And not the least of his pleasures was the belief that in Miss Homfrey he had found a good friend. She was a brick to take all this trouble, and his arm felt ever so much better already.

As the governess let down her long coils of dark hair before the cheval glass, she looked long and earnestly at her reflection.

"You're not at all a bad looking girl, Louise, my dear," she murmured, in a low tone—the children were asleep in the adjoining room. "You're an all-round genius, according to Bertie Wells. I wonder if you're good at solving mysteries, for, if I don't mistake, there's an interesting one to be solved beneath this very roof. Well, time will tell, and if you keep your eyes open you may win your reward." She sighed. "I wonder what it was that scared him like that, and what Bertie Wells said to him?" And, still wondering, and planning ways of satisfying her newborn curiosity, she feel asleep.

CHAPTER XII.

Nell's Confession.

"May I come in?" It was Joan, whose light tap at Nell's door, accompanied the words.

"I hoped you'd come. I've hardly had a word with you all day. You see what it is to be so popular. First the children, and then Mr. Wells—by the by, what do you think of him?" she broke off to inquire.

"Who, Mr. Wells? Oh, quite a nice little chap. Don't you think so? Certainly most entertaining," and Miss Fetherston broke into a ripple of laughter as she recalled Bertie's sayings.

"Yes, he's quite an acquisition to the district. We were getting a bit bored with our own society lately," Nell told her.

"Is he going to be with the Wilcocks permanently?" Joan asked, not that she felt much interest in Mr. Wells' doings, but she had come to Nell's room this evening for a quiet and confidential talk, such as the two friends often indulged in when the opportunity offered. The household had all retired for the night and, as far as Joan knew, each slept the sleep of the just. She herself had something to tell Nell—something which, to a girl, is one of the most important happenings in her life—the fact that a man had chosen her to be his life-long companion, and she had consented. For the girl had quite decided that it would only be an unnecessary hardship to make Tom Rawlins wait the stipulated month for his answer. She knew her own mind was fully made up. She would not change now, so why keep him waiting? As soon as she returned to Windfells she would give him her answer, and let him announce the engagement at once if he chose, as he no doubt would. So it was this momentous decision which was the moving factor in this particular midnight visit to her friend.

"He's to be at the Wilcocks till he has gained sufficient experience to manage a place of his own, I believe—or until he marries an heiress," Nell answered. "If his cousin had seen him making the running with you to-day, she'd have been in the seventh heaven."

"What about yourself?" Joan queried, surveying her friend and thinking what a pretty picture she made as she stood before the glass, brushing the thick masses of her brown hair the regulation hundred times before plaiting it up for the night. She was dark, like the rest of the Davenants, but, while her brothers' hair and eyes were almost black, her own were brown, and her skin, by careful veiling and sheltering from the scorching summer suns, creamy and soft. The crimson kimono she was wearing appeared to reflect the red of lips and cheeks which, at Joan's lightly flung question, blushed rosily.

"Oh, I?" and she laughed. "What chance would I have when you are present? Besides—I couldn't be happy with a man like Bertie Wells. I should want a man I could look up to, a big, strong man—someone much cleverer in every way than myself, whom I could love, honor and obey in everything—a person born to command, whom it would be a joy to serve, no matter what the service he demanded of me might be." Nell laid down her brush. "Wouldn't you?" she asked, swinging round to face her friend, as she put the question.

Joan stretched her arms up against the chair back and rested her head on them. The pale blue silk of the wrapper she had thrown over her night attire, brought into relief the glory of her hair, on which the lamplight played, catching each little curl, that framed her face, till it shone like the aureole of a pictured saint.

"I can't see myself consenting to be any man's doormat," she replied.

"Then you can't know what the meaning of love is," Nell told her, as she turned away, and, drawing off her rings, placed them on the dressing table.

"And do you?" Joan queried, watching her friend and

wondering if there were depths in the girl's nature she had never suspected her of possessing.

Instead of answering, Nell took up one of the rings she had just drawn from her finger.

"Do you remember the day you gave me this at school—when we were leaving? And I promised I'd always wear it until I became engaged, and had another to take its place," she said.

"Yes, and the one you gave me I have always worn till I lost it the night our shed was burnt," Joan told her. "I was awfully grieved about it."

"That was a small loss compared with the loss of your wool," her friend said.

Joan sat silent in thought for a while, the talk of the ring had brought vividly before her all she could remember of the night of the fire. "I didn't tell you about it," she said, "but I have never really believed my ring was lost. I feel perfectly certain it was taken off my finger before I properly regained my senses."

"But why—who would have done such a thing?" Nell was interested, her curiosity excited as much by Joan's manner as by her speech.

"You know Perry, one of the shearers, reached me in time to save me before the fire got to the part where I was sleeping."

Nell shivered. Every time she thought of her friend's peril it was like a hideous nightmare.

"When I awoke—or rather was awakened by the beam from the roof falling on me," continued Joan, "I couldn't move. Perry got the beam off somehow and carried me outside. I must have fainted, and only came to in the open air. Well, I distinctly remember someone taking my hand and—well, afterwards the ring was gone."

"But why should Perry take your ring?" Nell asked.

"It wasn't Perry took it," the other answered. "I questioned him closely, and he denied it absolutely, and I have no reason to doubt him."

"Then who else would have been able to take it off your finger? Were the other men—any of them—alone with you?"

"It was not one of the shed hands. Of that I am convinced," Joan told her.

"Then whom do you suspect?"

"I believe Tom Rawlins took it," the girl declared.

"Mr. Rawlins steal your ring! Oh, Joan!"

Joan raised herself in the chair, so that she could the better face her friend, who had drawn up a seat opposite during her friend's narrative.

"It wasn't stealing—not an ordinary theft, but several things have come back to me since, and I'm certain he knows more about it than anyone else."

"But didn't you ask him?" Nell inquired.

"I got him to have a search made by the men, and offered a reward. He said it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"I don't see any cause to suspect him for saying that. Anyone would have thought the same," Nell asserted.

"There was another thing," her friend went on. "The man who took hold of my hand, kissed it before he slipped off the ring. I think, probably, it was while he held it to his lips, he felt the ring, and took it off."

Nell looked sceptical. "How can you possibly tell what happened while you were unconscious?" she asked.

"I was not unconscious long. I couldn't have remembered so well all that took place if I had not come to almost at once."

"Perhaps you fainted twice over ——"

"I may have done so," the girl agreed.

"And in bringing you round he slapped your hand, and so the ring slipped off, and you may have imagined the kissing and all that part," Nell suggested.

Joan shook her head. "It was not imagination," she asserted.

"But why should Mr. Rawlins, of all men in the world, want a trumpery little thing like that?" Nell persisted.

"For a keepsake, perhaps."

Nell looked troubled. "Do you mean a man like Mr. Rawlins, your manager, a man above suspicion of doing anything paltry or mean, would stoop to steal a ring from your hand while you were unconscious—or while he thought you were?"

"I ought to have told you, Nell—I came in on purpose to tell you—Tom Rawlins has asked me to marry him." Joan's eyes were not on her friend, or she would have marvelled at the pallor that swept over her face at the words. Nell moistened her lips before she could shape the question, the answer to which she dreaded to hear.

"And you, Joan. What did you say?"

"I'm going to say yes." She raised her eyes. "Aren't you going to congratulate me, Nell?"

"I hope you will—both—be very happy." She spoke with an effort. It was so hard, the girl found, to keep her voice steady, and Joan must never suspect what the effort cost her.

"Are you not glad, Nell? You are the first person I've told, and I thought you'd be so glad."

Nell could not bear to hear even the hint of a reproach in her friend's voice. She rose, and bending over Joan said, as she kissed her cheek. "I am glad, dear, for your sake. You have been chosen by a man picked out of ten thousand. You cannot fail to be happy."

"Why, Nell!" the other exclaimed, as she felt a tear fall on her face. "I do believe you're crying!"

"No—no—it's nothing!" she denied. "I'm sorry—I didn't mean to only I hadn't thought somehow that you—that Mr. Rawlins cared, in that way at least ——" she broke off, and sought her handkerchief blindly, for the tears were no longer to be choked back.

"Nell! my dear little Nell!" and Joan flung herself to her knees on the floor beside her, her arms around her

friend. "I never guessed! Oh, dearest, I never knew you cared. My poor little Nell."

The girl's dark head was buried from sight on Joan's shoulder. "It's stupid of me and I'm ashamed to have let myself be so foolish. Please forget it. I do want you and him to be happy," she said through her tears, which now had free vent.

"Darling, why didn't you let me know you cared for him?" Joan exclaimed, folding her closer as if she would shield the smaller girl from trouble or suffering.

"I couldn't, Joan. How could I tell anyone? He never thought of me—not in that way. How could I ever hope he would look twice at plain little me, when he had tall, beautiful you always before his eyes, with your lovely golden hair ——"

"Nonsense, my dear Nell! You are a sweet, lovable little woman, born to make some good man supremely happy," and she kissed the bowed head lovingly. "After all, it's not an actual engagement yet, you know. I haven't said 'yes,'" Joan spoke, soothingly.

"But you will—you must! Oh, Joan! you can't break his heart!" Nell exclaimed earnestly, pleading for the man's happiness, though it spelt life long sorrow for herself.

"Do you really want me to say 'yes'?" Joan asked.

"I want him to be happy," Nell answered, softly.

"How you must love him," Joan said, wonderingly. This was the unselfishness of love.

"Don't you love him sufficiently to be glad to suffer for his happiness?" the other asked her.

She did not reply immediately. When she spoke her voice was very tender.

"Nell, dear, were you thinking of Tom Rawlins when you said that about the kind of man you'd choose to be your husband?"

Nell looked startled. "Promise you'll never, never let him know," she entreated.

"I promise he shall never learn it from me," the girl answered.

After awhile she raised her eyes to the little travelling clock on the mantelpiece. "It's past one, and I'm keeping you up," Joan said, rising from her chair.

"Stay in bed for breakfast," Nell advised, noticing the heavy lids as she kissed her friend good-night. "You've had a long and tiring day."

Joan, however, could not persuade her tired eyes to close in sleep, spite of the long day. She lay tossing, her mind at work in a continuous circle. If she made her lover happy, then must she break the loving heart of her dearest friend. If she decided to refuse Tom Rawlins, she must bring sorrow and disappointment to one who had stood by her long and faithfully, who had proved himself worthy of the greatest gift a woman can bestow. What ought she to do? It was a problem that seemed to have no satisfactory solution. Whatever course she took, some one dear to her must be made to suffer. Her only wish was to spare the one who would suffer most keenly. If she had not given Nell her promise to bury the knowledge she had gained in her own heart, there might have been a middle course. She might have taken means to bring before Rawlins the other girl's love for himself. Now that was become impossible. Her promise must be faithfully carried out.

Of her own feelings in the matter she took but scant consideration. She was not in love with the manager. She esteemed him highly and, had things run smoothly, had little doubt but that she would come to love him in time. But of the passionate worship revealed accidentally, that held sway in her friend's soul, Joan had never yet had experience. She supposed all girls were not alike. At any rate, she could not conceive such a breaking down of the barriers of pride and self-control in her own case as Nell had exhibited to-night. "Poor little Nell," she murmured.

She wondered if her friend were as restless and wakeful as she was, for, woo sleep as she might, her eyelids refused

to be weighed down. She counted imaginary sheep, and tried in vain many other equally infallible sleep-producers. At last she rose and, lighting the candle, sought her friend's room. Many a time at school she had crept into Nell's bed in defiance of rules, in search of comfort from her friend in her youthful troubles. Now the longing to bring comfort in her turn seized upon her, and she must tell the other, without delay, that she would never become Tom Rawlins's wife; that whatever happened, no man must ever come between them. She stole noiselessly through the intervening passages and, opening the door, entered softly.

"May I sleep with you, Nell, dear?" she whispered, advancing to the bed where the other girl lay.

The candle light showed Nell's dark head with its long braids of hair spread over the pillow. Her face was turned away, and it was not till Joan stood over her that she saw, by the regular rise and fall of her bosom, that she was asleep. Nothing but a pathetic droop of the lips betrayed the suffering that had fallen on her so short a time back.

Softly as she had come, Joan departed. Sleep was a more effectual comforter for a stricken soul than even the dearest of friends could be.

CHAPTER XIII.

A Second Chance.

"Joan! isn't you going to get up? The barf's been waiting a long time."

"Bother the bath! Let it wait," and Joan turned slowly over in bed. "Oh, it's you, Tottie!" she said, sleepily, seeing the child standing at the door. "Tell Auntie Nell I think I'll have breakfast in bed," and she rolled over lazily.

Nell, coming in with her tray later on, turned such a bright and happy countenance on her friend that the latter began to wonder whether the events of the previous night had been a dream. It was not until Nell, with a gentle apology for her remissness the previous night, began to wish her every happiness, that Joan fully realised all that had passed between them.

Daylight revealed the tangle as far less formidable than it had appeared at first. Miss Fetherston felt this morning that she was quite capable of guiding the lives of others, as well as her own, into paths that bore promise of happiness.

"Come and stay with me at Windfells for a few days, Nell. I'm just longing for a girl of my own age to talk to," she said.

Nell hesitated, blushed—for did it not mean that she would meet Tom Rawlins daily—and ended by accepting the invitation.

They left Bunglatta after an early lunch. Miss Fetherston did not see Wilfred Davenant again before her departure, he having ridden away before she was up, so she was informed. But Mr. Wells was still in evidence. Determined not to leave without saying good-bye in person to Miss Fetherston, he found a ready excuse for delaying their departure by explaining the unwillingness of Mollie and Annie Wilcocks to part from their little friends.

"Hope we shall often have the pleasure of meetin' again, Miss Joan. Quite charming altogether, don't cher know! Shan't soon forget yesterday. Red letter day, and all that sort of thing, what!"

Joan felt she could do no less than extend a cordial invitation to Bertie and his cousin to pay a visit to Windfells, which the young man eagerly accepted for both.

"Good-bye, Auntie Nell! Good-bye, Joan! I hope you'll come to my birfday party again next year!" cried Tottie, and she waved vigorously till they were out of sight.

Long after Joan's ponies had carried them out of sight of the house, a solitary horseman watched from a distant hill the vehicle, which grew smaller as it receded up the long road. With it went the sunlight and all that it stood for to him who gazed with longing eyes.

As the distance swallowed up the faint, moving speck, the man heaved a sigh. It was as if a light had gone out of his own life, leaving a shadow that threatened to envelop him in darkness. Slowly he turned his horse's head and rode away in the opposite direction, from where lay his day's work—the direction of the bridge paddock.

Letting down a slip-panel, he led his animal through and onward to the place where the trodden down grass showed traces of the previous afternoon's picnic. A litter of paper and bread crusts strewed the spot.

Wilfred Davenant stood motionless, seeing once more the girl in the blue frock—the angel clad in a little bit of heaven—with the frank blue eyes, that could look the whole world in the face; how different from his own, he thought, with shame. He recalled her every movement—how she had half risen to meet his outstretched hand. He felt again her soft fingers within his own, and the remembrance was torture. He covered his eyes with his hand and groaned with the agony of it.

"Oh, God! if there is a God, give her to me!"

It was the cry of the lost soul, bereft of all hope in this world, or the next, by his own acts.

Something shone among the trampled grass. He stooped to pick it up. Only a teaspoon, overlooked in packing up the baskets, such a little thing, yet how bright and glittering it lay in his hand. What a contrast to his roughened skin, coarse and scarred with cicatrices left from old wounds. He regarded it with loathing—the battered finger nails were repulsive in his present mood. This was no fit hand to offer in greeting to his liege lady. Yet Miss Fetherston had not been repelled. He thought of his brother's well kept hands, his carefully manicured nails. Wilfred wondered if in time his own could ever attain such perfection. He must ask Miss Homfrey—she would tell him what to do. It was wonderful how the thought of the clever governess rose naturally to his mind, when he found himself in a difficulty. He had come to rely on her help in more ways than one. His first doubts about her had given place to an almost childlike trust, for with all his wasted years he was no match for a clever woman.

Riding home, the dark cloud of depression again closed over him. The unbridgeable gulf between a girl like Miss Fetherston and himself yawned wider the longer he allowed his thoughts to dwell on it. It was no mere superficial trouble such as Miss Homfrey could deal with. It was the whole course of his past life that lay between them—that rendered him for ever unworthy to aspire to a girl like Joan. Black and hopeless his future would ever loom, and nobody but himself was to blame. Could he endure contemplating the long, dreary years? Or would he be driven, sooner or later, to end them? If not to end, then at least to forget for a time and seek oblivion in the drunkard's way. The public house stood invitingly near. He drew rein and alighted, his promise to Stephen driven out of his memory by the longing to forget for a short time, the despair that gripped him.

Later, as he rode up the track leading to the stables behind the house, a sense of shame began to take possession of him. The short-lived pleasure he had derived from the effects of the liquor had passed off, and he felt angry with himself for his weakness in having yielded to temptation. The jeering remark of the grinning stable-

boy as Wilfred dismounted clumsily, called forth an insulting rejoinder from the boss's brother, which the youth gleefully related in the men's hut later on.

With unsteady step and reeling gait, Wilfred reached his own room, by way of the verandah, fearful lest those within the house should behold him in his present condition.

Throwing himself on to a couch, he fell into a heavy doze, satisfied that, though people in the township and the station hands had witnessed his fall from grace, Stephen need never know of the promise broken. The owner of Bunglatta was not at all the sort of man to encourage tittle-tattle from his own, or anyone else's employees. Wilfred, therefore, felt pretty certain that, if he did not betray his own lapse, no one else was likely to do so.

He was aroused some time later by the crying of a child, whimpering as if in pain or suffering. He jumped up, sobered at once by the fear that Teddy was hurt—injured—in need of help from him. Apart from his own feeling for Joan, which partook more of the nature of worship as yet, than the ordinary mundane love of man for his mate, Wilfred loved his small nephew more than any living being.

In Teddy he could picture his own youth, with all its fair promise, in his own case, alas! how blurred and blighted. If he ever prayed for another it would be a prayer to his Maker that little Teddy might never turn aside from the path of honor and uprightness, in which he was being trained—that he might never sink to the depths his own soul had fathomed, and from which he was now struggling so hard to rise. What success he had achieved seemed so little. How easily he had fallen, only to-day, when temptation arose. How impossible seemed the hope that he could ever regain his old place in that world—his world once—inhabited by honorable men and pure women.

He knew that his present position in his brother's household was only a resting place on the journey, granted to him during good behaviour, and though Stephen found

him useful on the station, he might at any time forfeit his brother's good natured forbearance by his own conduct.

Following the direction from which the heartbroken sounds came, he found the little fellow curled up in a corner of the passage.

"Why, Teddy, my son, what on earth's the matter?"

He felt a load lifted on discovering the child apparently sound in wind and limb. Raising him in his arms, "Tell me what it's all about," he urged.

The boy, amid sobs, made known the trouble.

"Daddy's been whipping you," Wilfred repeated. "Poor little chap, never mind, don't cry any more. I suppose you were naughty."

"I wasn't, I never did nothing," declared Teddy, indignantly, between the sobs, now dying down under the soothing influence of his uncle's sympathy.

"Daddy wouldn't whip you for nothing. You must have been naughty," the man declared.

"I wasn't, I only said what you said to Jim to-day."

Only that the child clung tightly, the sudden slackening of the man's arms would have landed him on the floor.

"Whereabouts were you?" Wilfred demanded, abruptly, while he tried to recall his words and actions earlier in the day.

"In the stable. I saw you coming home and waited for you," Teddy told him.

It was a favorite amusement of the boy's to meet Wilfred and ride to the house on his shoulders. To-day he had left his horse to be unsaddled by the groom instead of doing it himself, as usual. He had forgotten to look for Teddy. Thus had his sin found him out, he said to himself.

"You must never say it again, my boy," he admonished.

"But you said it!" the child protested.

"It was very naughty of me," his uncle answered,

and at this moment Stephen Davenant's voice interrupted with:

"Wilfred! I want you."

"There—now Daddy's going to give me a whipping, too," Wilfred said, as he set down his nephew.

The boy's sobs ceased instantly, and he looked up at his uncle, an eager light on his tear-stained face.

"Can I come and see him do it?"

"I think not, Teddy," and he entered his brother's office to receive what might prove to be his sentence of banishment.

"Understand, once and for all, Wilfred, I'll not have the language of the hut spoken in my house!" Stephen's tone, though not loud, conveyed the just anger of an outraged parent.

"I'm more sorry than I can say. I wouldn't have had it happen for the world." Wilfred felt abject beneath his brother's righteous wrath.

Stephen looked at him sharply. "You've been drinking!" he said, sternly.

The other man's eyes fell. He had no excuse to offer.

"So much for your promise to me," Stephen went on, contempt mastering his voice. "I ought to have known you were not to be trusted. I let you come into my household, relying on your word of honor not to disgrace me—honor! Phew! You don't know the meaning of the word." He turned his back on his brother, and looked out of the window, seeing nothing.

"I'm more ashamed of myself than you can ever be," Wilfred spoke, in a low, helpless voice, as if he knew there could be no condoning of his conduct. "And if you intend to send me away from Bunglatta, I admit you will be quite justified. But I want you to know, Steve, that your kindness in giving me the shelter of your roof has not been thrown away on an ungrateful devil. I have tried to keep straight, as I promised you. To-day—I failed for the first time to-day. I thought I was stronger, but the

old Adam conquered. I don't suppose it's any use asking you to overlook it and give me another chance—but I have tried, Steve, I want so badly to retrieve my life—to make myself more worthy of—of ——" he broke off, afraid of confessing more than he intended his brother to guess of his inmost feelings.

There was a long pause before Stephen spoke.

"I admit I'm disappointed—grievously disappointed. You were shaping so well, too—even Kitty began to think we might have been too hard on you."

"I don't suppose Kitty will speak to me after to-day," Wilfred said. "She'll say she always knew I couldn't be trusted to keep straight."

"I have no doubt Kitty will do what she thinks right," her husband hastened to tell him.

"Are you going to send me away?"

"Where would you go if I did? You wouldn't be safe for a week away from here. It's the one place in the world the police will never think of looking for—for ——"

"For Bill Dawson, the incendiary and would-be murderer—may as well say it," the younger man said, bitterly.

"No, I did not intend to say it, because you swore to me you were neither, and also because—walls have ears."

There was a light tap at the door. Stephen stepped quickly across and opened it, to find Miss Homfrey outside. She held an empty inkstand in her hand.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't know you were engaged," she said, apologetically, turning to go.

"Don't go. What can I do for you?" Mr. Davenant asked.

"I was going to beg a little ink for the children's lessons. The jar in the store-room is empty," the governess said.

He filled her stand from his own, and waited till she was out of hearing.

Turning to Wilfred, "I sincerely hope she did not overhear you," he said, anxiously.

"I would trust her with my life," the other answered, warmly. "I have no fear of her since I have come to know her kindness of heart."

Stephen looked searchingly at him. He had never thought of his brother and the governess having anything in common.

"I hope you are right," he answered. "But don't let her make a fool of you, and don't make a fool of yourself."

"Then you will give me another chance? I am to stay on?"

"For the present—yes!" Stephen answered.

CHAPTER XIV.

An Unsuccessful Wooing.

Joan's object in taking Nell back to Windfells with her was to carry out a secret plan she had formed of bringing her friend and Tom Rawlins together. Thus she might act the good fairy and secure the happiness of both. True, the manager was cherishing the hope of winning herself and would, at present at least, have no room in his thoughts for another.

Joan foresaw a good deal of difficulty in straightening out the threads of her scheme. She must make Tom understand definitely that she herself had decided to decline his offer. Yet, as the month she had allowed him was not yet gone, how could she bring him to speak of the matter before Nell's visit should end? She half thought of writing him a note, saying she had reconsidered it, and that her answer must be "no." Then she feared the effect of the disappointment would be to make him prefer to mope alone instead of giving the girls his company at tennis or bridge, or at such other times as he should be at leisure to amuse them.

After much strenuous thinking, in which she could seek no outside help, she concluded she would leave things as they were, only encouraging Nell and Tom Rawlins to entertain each other whenever possible, frequently leaving them alone together, with a hasty excuse for her absence.

She knew that poor Nell saw through her transparent scheming, and was sometimes made uncomfortable thereby. Tom Rawlins, happy in serving the lady he loved, lent himself readily to the task of entertaining Miss Davenant, just as he would have made things pleasant for any other of Joan's friends. He played tennis till he was tired, and was almost invariably beaten, for Nell was an exceptionally good player. In the evenings they played

bridge for small stakes, Joan insisting on taking her aunt for partner. If nobody else was altogether happy at the result, Mrs. Robson at least went to bed quite satisfied with her few shillings won from the other two, owing to Nell's mistakes in playing unusually badly. Joan found her friend almost reduced to tears one evening, as she wished her good-night.

"What can he think of me?" she said. "Did you see the shocking way I played? I not only messed up a splendid hand of my own, but when Mr. Rawlins doubled 'no trumps,' I went and led a club, though I held the queen of hearts all the time."

"Never mind, dear. I'm sure you needn't let it worry you," Joan spoke. consolingly.

"But I can't help its worrying me," protested Nell. "Such an idiotic thing to do, and he could have got a 'little slam' if I had played properly, whereas it gave you the rubber. And did you see his face when I failed to return his lead?"

"You make too much of it. Anyone can make mistakes," Miss Fetherston told her.

"Anyone needn't be such a fool as I was to-night. Don't ask me to play with Mr. Rawlins again," she pleaded. "I'm sure he'd be much happier with you for a partner."

Joan realised that anxiety to shine in the eyes of the man had rendered her friend so nervous that she was unable to keep a cool head for the game. She was also sufficiently observant to see that there was very little prospect of Rawlins turning his thoughts in the direction of Nell Davenant until she had finally disposed of his hopes about herself.

"What a tiresome world it is," she reflected. "Nothing seems to go quite as one wishes."

However, into this tangled situation, there burst, without warning, a very welcome diversion, in the shape of Mrs. Wilcocks and her cousin.

"You see we took you at your word," Bertie Wells announced breezily, as he brought up the horses with a

flourish at the verandah steps, where Joan stood to receive them. "Trot insisted on my bringing her to day. Says Mrs. Robson's promised to show her a new crochet pattern or somethin', don't cher know?"

"I'm awfully glad you have come, Mrs. Wilcocks, especially while I have Nell Davenant with me," Joan responded, as she greeted the buxom matron, otherwise Trot. "I've been fearing she'd find it dull here. We're such a small family, compared with the houseful she is accustomed to, and it's always lively with children in a house."

"Too lively sometimes," Mrs. Wilcocks agreed. "You should just hear the noise Bertie makes with our children. Oh, yes, I know, they're quiet enough away from home," as Joan protested in defence of Mollie and Annie. "But they can be like wild Indians when they get going."

The advent of the two visitors proved a godsend. What Mrs. Wilcock's intentions in regard to herself, or Nell, with Bertie might be, Miss Fetherston did not inquire. She merely accepted the situation as being all that she could desire. With Bertie Wells to entertain, she must perforce throw Nell still more into Tom Rawlins' company. Instead of singles, the tennis developed into hard fought doubles, in which Bertie's skill, though more than a match for Tom, did not always succeed in wresting the victory from Nell and her partner, Joan's play being inferior to her friend's.

While the young people amused themselves out of doors, Trot Wilcocks conversed with Mrs. Robson, or, as she put it, learnt several new crochet patterns. But, had Aunt Lavinia only known, the patterns were simply an excuse for the gathering of several items of information which Trot intended to use in shaping the destinies of two of the party.

She had urged her cousin to cultivate the acquaintance of Miss Davenant in the first place, as a possible matrimonial prize. On Bertie's return from Tottie's birthday party, however, she was not long in discovering that Joan Fetherston, and not Miss Davenant, had captured the young man's fancy.

Nothing daunted, Trot immediately turned about the rudder of the matrimonial ship, and steered at once for the new port.

"Strike while the iron's hot," she advised her cousin, "and, above all, don't lose any time, or you'll see her snapped up under your eyes by that Rawlins man."

"What, that managah fellah? Surely she'd never throw herself away on him!" Bertie exclaimed, incredulously.

"My dear boy, he's ever so much better looking than you, you know," Trot told him, "and he has made himself necessary to her, so that she consults him about everything. I hear; and—what counts most with some women—he's always there; propinquity, you know, does a lot."

So it was that the two arrived so opportunely at Windfells, right in the middle of Nell's visit, and Bertie lost no time in livening up things for his hostess. Joan played up to him willingly, refusing to notice Tom Rawlins' black looks, so often cast in the other man's direction.

Nell spent a week of alternate pain and pleasure, the latter predominating, for she found herself becoming daily on more intimate terms with the manager. If he poured his confidences into her sympathetic ear, what matter if they were all connected with another woman? It proved his implicit trust in her that he should do it, and even that small grain of comfort was welcome to her.

"I can't imagine what Miss Joan can see in the fellow," he would grumble, after watching the other couple laughing and chatting together for perhaps half an hour at a time. "An empty-headed nincompoop, I call him," with an angry slap at a mosquito on his hand.

Nell hastened to agree that neither could she see much in Bertie Wells, though, of course, he had travelled a good deal before coming out here, and could be most interesting in relating his experiences.

"It's not that I mean," Rawlins said. "Sensible talk I don't object to, but look at him now!"

Nell looked. The others were some distance off standing near a trellis covered with red flowered passion vine.

Bertie had taken the girl's hand in his own and was carefully scrutinising it. Being rather short-sighted, he held it near enough to his face to give the appearance of touching it with his lips. Nell and her companion were too far away to hear what the man was saying, and when Joan suddenly withdrew it, they heard a ripple of laughter. Rawlins rose angrily.

"The idiot!" he exclaimed, and, leaving his companion to follow or not, as she chose, moved towards Miss Fethers-ton and Bertie.

"May we hear the joke, too?" he inquired, in a voice which he tried to make appear careless, but failed badly.

"Mr. Wells has been reading the lines in my hand," Joan explained.

"Trying to, Miss Joan, but you wouldn't let me finish," he complained.

"I don't believe a word of it, you know," she said, laughing gaily.

"I should think not!" Rawlins agreed. "What did you see in her hand to tell her?" he asked, interested, in spite of his denunciation.

"There's a cross right on the heart line," Wells explained, "and that indicates trouble, don't cher know?"

"The course of true love never did run smooth," quoted Joan, mischievously. Then, catching sight of Tom's pleading eyes, she colored with vexation.

She had been so full of the belief that it needed only a few days of Nell's companionship to turn him away from herself, that this sudden revelation that the poor fellow was still living in hopes of winning her heart, came as a reproach to the girl. All at once she realised that she might have been somewhat cruel to this man, who had offered her his love less than a month ago, and, at her own request, had waited silently until the time should be ripe to renew his suit. Then and there she made up her mind not to keep him waiting any longer. As soon as Nell and the other visitors left she would give him her

answer. Meanwhile, she saw that it pained him to see her flirting with Bertie Wells, and for the next few days her ingenuity was taxed to keep things going smoothly among the various persons concerned. When the day came for farewells to be said, she felt relief rather than regret, and with Nell's departure a couple of days after the other two left, she sought the first opportunity of telling Mr. Rawlins the state of her mind.

"You mean you can never care for me, then?" he asked, still hoping this might not be final.

"Not in the way you wish, Tom. I'm sorry I let you think otherwise," she said, apologetically.

"You did let me think I had a chance," he reminded her. "You thought so yourself once."

"Perhaps I did, but I know better now."

"And you still tell me there's no one else?" He could not understand her attitude. He had been so sure of winning her.

"There is no one else—in the way you mean," she told him.

"Someone has come between us while you were at Bunglatta," he asserted. "Somebody you met there." Jealousy pointed to the young Englishman. "That little jumping-jack of a fellow—surely he hasn't the audacity to ask you to marry him?"

"No, no! Indeed, you're quite mistaken. Mr. Wells is very amusing, very good fun and all that, but he can never be anything to me," she assured him.

"Then—Miss Joan, you'd never think of ruining your life over that brother of Mr. Davenant's," he exclaimed, earnestly. "He's a rotter, believe me—a bad egg, if ever there was one. I couldn't insult you by repeating the things I've been told about him."

She hastened to correct such an impossible supposition on his part.

"You need not have the slightest fear of my losing my heart to either Mr. Wells or Wilfred Davenant. I can

promise you that. Something did happen at Bunglatta, but what it was I cannot tell you, only that it has nothing whatever to do with either of the men you mention. For myself I am perfectly heart-whole."

"Then tell me—may I hope?" His whole being pleaded so hard she found it very difficult to remain firm, but the recollection of Nell's bowed head came to her aid.

"No," she answered. "Please believe that I can never give you any other answer." She would not even offer him her hand to soften the blow.

He turned away when he found she was not to be moved. He thought of the letter he had posted only the previous day—a letter declining a working partnership in a Queensland station, offered by an old friend of his boyhood. It would have meant an independence, probably would have led to future fortune. But he had refused it in order to remain at Windfells in the service of the woman he loved —the woman he had made so sure was to become his wife. He could have found it in his heart to regret that refusal now, to wish the letter recalled, so bitter was the blow that Joan had dealt him. Yet he felt no anger against the girl. No wish to bring trouble on her could ever find room in his big heart. He would still continue to guard her interests as he had done hitherto, only it would be torture to have to see her daily, to meet her and behave as if nothing had passed between them, when he felt the whole world had changed for him, and the sun of his hopes had set.

Aunt Lavinia observed a difference in the manager, and remarked upon it.

"I'm afraid Mr. Rawlins is not well. He seems so quiet and hardly ever gives us the pleasure of his company since Nell Davenant left. Do you think, Joan, he can have proposed to Nell and been rejected?" she inquired, scenting an interesting romance.

"I don't think it probable," her niece answered.

"I don't think it likely, either, but Mrs. Wilcocks suggested there might be something between them. In fact,

she thought it would be a very good thing for Nell if she did get him. Of course, you know I hold different views. In fact, I have always thought it would be a desirable arrangement if you could attach him permanently to Windfells, my dear. But when I suggested his being a suitable husband for you, she was most emphatic that it was quite out of the question your marrying your own manager, people would consider it infra dig, she says. As if what other people think need matter to us! In fact, I felt rather annoyed she should put it that way. I suppose she would like that cousin of hers to be settled here as your husband. Only that I could not be rude to her, I would like to let her know that I consider Mr. Rawlins a far better match than Mr. Wells. He's much better looking, to begin with, than Mr. Wells, and though some people hold that good looks don't count in a man, I say a woman ought to choose a handsome husband for her daughters' sake. It's well known girls generally favor the father—going, dear? Well, good-night! Sleep well!"

In the solitude of her own room Joan brooded over what her aunt had told her. She felt hurt. It appeared as if these people, who called themselves her friends, had used her unfairly. She felt that she had been hawked about as a desirable acquisition for young men desirous of settling down comfortably on her property. How dare Mrs. Wilcocks throw Bertie Wells at her in this barefaced way and expect her to take him for better or worse, whether she cared for him or not! She certainly did not wish for him in that way. She could not look upon him as her future husband, though she supposed there were girls in the world who would gladly consent to share their life with him. Compared with Tom Rawlins, he was lacking in nearly every way. His one accomplishment was singing, and that he did well, being the possessor of a sweet tenor voice, which he knew how to use.

Joan enjoyed the evening he had sung to them. Mrs. Wilcocks had taken care to pack his songs when she brought him to Windfells, looking upon this as one of the most potent weapons in his attack on the heart of a young, well-dowered girl. Balfe's evergreen "Goodnight, Be-

loved!'' as Bertie sang it, was calculated to subdue any heart seeking in silence for the companionship of its kind. Joan's heart, however, was seeking nothing of the sort. She was heart whole at present.

Bertie also sang ''The Rosary,'' since relegated to the repertory of the amateur cornetist, but at that time still fairly fresh. He had begged Miss Fetherston to act as his accompanist, but, being no musician, she wisely left the task to Mrs. Wilcocks, and enjoyed the performance all the more in consequence, for Trot played exceptionally well.

Miss Fetherston thought Bertie would have been better advised had he taken up singing as a means of livelihood instead of trying to succeed on the land. Unbusinesslike in every way, what a contrast he formed to Tom Rawlins. She smiled when she thought how foolish she would be to entrust such a property as Windfells to Mr. Wells'. management. He would quickly make ducks and drakes of her fortune. Whereas Tom—she caught herself up in haste. Surely she was not beginning to regret her refusal of Tom's hand; and yet what a small thing had changed her destiny. Had Windfells been connected with the telephone on that day she drove herself to Tottie's birthday party, she would now be engaged to Rawlins. Even Nell's tears would have been too late then. She would never have played the jilt. Was she sorry? She scarcely knew. If Tom could be persuaded to fall in love with her friend she knew she would be glad, but could he be so persuaded?

It would require tactful handling, she decided. On no account must she hurry things. Let him get over his present disappointment before attempting to advance Nell Davenant's interests. She was only thankful he had not taken her refusal so much to heart that he would wish to quit Windfells. As yet she knew nothing of the very tempting offer of a working partnership Rawlins had just received from an old chum. Had she dreamed of it, quite possibly she might have considered it her duty to urge his acceptance of it. It would provide an opening for him to a far better prospect than remaining on as her manager.

Joan's idea, as far as it had taken form, was that once Nell and Tom were married, they might use the girl's money, at present invested in Bunglatta, to buy a small property either in Victoria or New South Wales. She had no misgivings about Tom's ability to make such a property pay. He had shown what he could do with Windfells.

She only hoped, once she succeeded in bringing them to the point, that the engagement would not be too short, for she would feel lost without Rawlins' help. Perhaps —and she smiled as the idea flashed through her brain— perhaps when that time came, Bertie Wells might have acquired sufficient experience to apply for a position as her manager. Only she trusted that he would not always be trying to propose to her.

If she could have listened to Mrs. Wilcock's interrogation of her cousin as they drove away from Windfells, on the conclusion of their visit, Miss Fetherston might have felt less inclined to treat his attentions in so kindly a fashion.

"My dear Trot," the young man expostulated, "I really couldn't get a chance, 'pon honor! Every time I tried she baulked."

"Rubbish! You should have persisted. You're nothing but a fool, Bertie."

"I'm quite aware of that. So's Miss Fetherston," returned the other. "That's why she don't want to marry me, don't cher know?"

"But you must keep at it till she does want you—or thinks she does," announced Trot. "Look at me," she went on, "George asked me three times before I said 'yes.' "

"You don't tell me! But, having refused him twice, how came you to accept him the third time?" Bertie asked, eager to learn all he could of the ways of women.

"Well, for one thing, George swore it was the last time he intended asking me, and for another thing, there was no one else in view."

"Ah! and you thought you'd better take George than be left on the shelf, Trot?" he suggested.

"I might have done worse than George," Trot said, complacently.

"And Miss Fetherston might do worse than take me, you think?"

"Um—she might do better, too. You're not much of a catch, Bertie, though you are my cousin. You've no prospects except a rich marriage. You've no—well, not extra brains or ability to make your mark in the world ——"

"Oh, come, I say Trot!" he interrupted, protestingly.

"Well, you know you haven't."

"You're not complimentary, I must say."

"My dear boy, it's no use shutting one's eyes to one's shortcomings. Of course, I know there are lots of girls in the world who would jump at you—nice ones, too—but Joan Fetherston's different. I'm sorry you fixed your heart on her. I thought you and Nell Davenant would hit it off well, if only you had taken a fancy to her."

"Or she to me," put in Bertie. "After your very candid criticism, I shall not feel like approaching any young lady with a view to matrimony for a considerable time, I'm afraid."

"Sorry if I hurt your feelings, old chap, but if you want the plums in this world you must make an effort to gather them—not wait for them to fall into your mouth."

CHAPTER XV.

A Warning.

Summer set in early that year, fulfilling a number of prophecies that such would be the case Many people, pinning their faith to Wragge, quoted his forecasts, heralding one of the most severe droughts ever experienced. Aunt Lavinia confirmed the gloomy anticipations, advancing as a reason for her contention—

"They have had such a hot, dry summer at home, and our weather invariably follows the English weather," which, considering the area of Australia and its variations of climate, was rather a sweeping assertion.

However, the hot days certainly arrived earlier than usual. People were not prepared for them. The time of the Melbourne Cup races—always an uncertain climatic season—brought out the thinnest and flimsiest frocks, purchased hastily in some instances, to take the place of more substantial garments, prepared beforehand in anticipation of at least one cool or rainy day during race week. The heavily grassed country turned from the green of Spring to gold, then to a uniform, monotonous brown, beneath the increasing warmth of the sun. Watercourses became thin, trickling channels, to appear later on as mud holes. The surface of the land formed into long, irregular cracks and fissures under the drying-up process. Graziers, foolish enough to be caught with their country over-stocked, either rushed their surplus stock into markets already overcrowded, or sought agistment at exorbitant rentals.

Neither Windfells or Bunglatta, however, were so caught. Tom Rawlins had exercised his judgment in disposing of a considerable number of sheep off the shears, taking advantage of good prices to recoup, in some degree, the loss suffered by Miss Fetherston through the fire.

Stephen Davenant never over-stocked, preferring always to keep some well-grassed paddocks for an emergency, rather than have every foot of land eaten bare.

Wilfred quickly adapted himself to his surroundings, gaining once more the good opinion of his brother, and performing twice the amount of work accomplished by his predecessors. Stephen, moreover, declared that he felt perfectly satisfied to leave his brother in full charge during his own and Kitty's visit to town for the Melbourne Cup, a visit Mrs. Davenant would not have willingly missed. All her friends were to be met with in town at Cup time—not her Victorian friends only—but those from Sydney and Adelaide as well. She could be sure of seeing a number of them at Menzies', where Stephen and she always stayed when in Melbourne.

Joan decided to forego her usual visit to town for the Spring Carnival. In place of two or three expensive race dresses and hats, she ordered half a dozen dainty cotton frocks for her visit to the sea-side later on. When her friends remonstrated, she laughingly pleaded the need for economy.

"I've had serious losses, you know, and don't want to run into debt." So she remained at Windfells, and watched the land turn brown under the fierce heat.

. . . . . .

As Christmas drew near Mrs. Davenant set about the usual preparations. Besides the puddings and mince-pies for her own household—most unsuitable food for Australian midsummer—she made enough to distribute to various other homes within reach. Even as far off as the township of Colterton, her Christmas dainties were sent.

Among her numerous protegees to be remembered at the festive season was old Bridget at the Settlement. Bridget, or old Biddy, as she was called, had been servant in Kitty Davenant's family before Kitty's marriage. She followed the bride to her new home and nursed the two children through babyhood, until she was pensioned off by Stephen, and given a small cottage at what was known as the Government Village Settlement, about five miles from

Bunglatta homestead. The station paddocks adjoined the settlers' holdings, which proved a more profitable arrangement for the settlers than for Stephen.

These settlements, started after the collapse of the great Land Boom in the nineties, with a great flourish of trumpets by the Government then in power, failed to fulfil the high expectations of the enthusiasts responsible for them. Several causes contributed to their want of success. The agents of the Government secured land unsuitable for the purpose; cut it up into allotments of unsuitable size for settlers to make a living off; and lastly, sent unsuitable town dwellers to occupy them. So that, with few exceptions, the village settlements, that were looked upon as a means of getting people back to the land, became deserted failures. In a few instances, where men of the agricultural class from the old country were settled on the holdings, they succeeded in making a living, especially where they had the assistance of a large family to supply labor.

At the Bunglatta Village Settlement one of the few to remain and to succeed on his holding was Mick Phelan, who claimed kinship with old Biddy.

Mick had so far prospered that, in addition to his original piece of ground, he now possessed other portions, which had been thrown up in disgust by townsmen, who resented the hardship and dullness of country life.

Mick Phelan ran a few sheep, not always on his own land—the Bunglatta paddocks were near, and the grass temptingly convenient. Stephen Davenant had not been always well served by his employees, either. His boundary riders sometimes shut their eyes to the condition of the fences between the station paddocks and Phelan's property. Loose panels and cut wires were not repaired as soon as they should have been. The Bunglatta sheep could stray on to Phelan's place, too, but seldom, by any chance, strayed back again. With the ear-mark obliterated, or cunningly altered, Mick felt safe from the law. A few dozen more sheep skins might be found in his possession than ever he had sheep to run, but who was to prove he had not come by them honestly? There was no evi-

dence to bring against him, and if he did go in for a little sheep-stealing, well, he was not the only one. who indulged in it. So he felt no qualms of conscience, especially as he argued, a few sheep meant little to Mr. Davenant, and went a long way towards feeding the wife and children.

With the advent of Wilfred Davenant, Mick Phelan saw an end coming to his prosperous career. Wilfred not only had the fences restored once, but kept an eye constantly on them, renewing cut wires as often as they were damaged. When he found Phelan's sheep depasturing on prohibited ground, he turned them out, and warned their owner. Mick scowled, but took no steps to mend matters till Wilfred, growing tired of warning, took other measures. He turned the strange sheep out on to the road, where they got mixed up with a passing mob, and Phelan and the drover indulged in some lurid language before the strays could be separated. Still more exasperating for Phelan, none of the Bunglatta sheep were placed in the paddocks bordering on the settlement. Cattle and horses were turned into them, but cattle stealing was too risky under the circumstanees, and horse flesh was no use for feeding the wife and children.

So Mick Phelan became an ill-used man, the possessor of a grievance which, by dint of constant nursing, grew with the summer's heat.

It was a few days before Christmas that Mrs. Davenant, having packed a hamper of good things, told Miss Homfrey she wished them taken to old Biddy.

"It's a long time since the children went to see her. They have not been since Tottie's birthday, and I don't want her to feel neglected," she said.

Miss Homfrey gave the groom the order for the little governess-cart, which she always used when driving her charges to the Settlement and elsewhere in the neighborhood. The hamper was put in and the three occupants took their places.

"And stop at the hotel for a bottle of whisky—the best they have," Kitty added, giving her money to pay for it.

Though her husband prohibited drink of any sort coming under his roof, his wife knew old Biddy's enjoyment of a "dhrop of the crathur!"

"And the poor old thing hasn't many pleasures in her life," she said, when excusing herself for doing a kind action, of which she felt her husband would disapprove.

The day was hot. The slow pace of the fat, lazy pony made the drive one of the longest Miss Homfrey had experienced, considering barely five miles had to be traversed.

Old Biddy's welcome made up for it. Her cottage was creeper-covered and fairly cool, and they stayed drinking milk and eating her home-made currant loaf, while she never ceased talking as she unpacked the generous hamper with exclamations of simulated surprise for the children's edification. The bottle of whisky she regarded as the most precious of all Mrs. Davenant's gifts.

"'Tis hidin' it safe away oi'll be, Miss," she said, suiting the action to the word. "Them Phalans'll be round here for sure as soon as ye've gone away, Miss, just to see pwhat ye've bin bringin' me. 'Tis after shtickin' their nose into iverythin' they'll be, an' taastin' o' this an' a taastin' o' that, sure isn't it mesilf that knows? An' wanst they git a soight o' me whisky, 'tis the shmell av the corrk's all oi'll be gettin' for mesilf."

The hamper yielded up a variety of potted and tinned delicacies, in addition to the special Christmas fare, not forgetting a cake of tobacco, for old Biddy was fond of her pipe.

"'Tis the foine toime I'll be havin' entoirely," she chuckled, stowing them away in her cupboard. "An' 'tis me grateful thanks to the koind misthress oi'll be askin' yez to convey fur me, Miss."

The governess promised to deliver the message.

"An' there's jist a worrd av warrnin', oi'd ask ye to convey at the same toime, Miss. 'Tis not mesilf as 'ud be afther doin' a dirthy thrick to me own kith an' kin at all, at all, ye ondershtand. But ef ye'd jist give the masther

a bit av a hint about his brother's goins on, an' pwhat 'tis bound to lade to, 'twill save a soight av throuble may be.''

''You mean Mr. Wilfred, Biddy?'' Miss Homfrey asked, and noticing Teddy's ears pricked, she ordered the children to run outside and play.

Teddy protested. ''I want to hear what Uncle Wilfred's done to Biddy,'' he argued.

''Run outside and play when I tell you, or learn twelve verses of Gordon to-night.''

''I'll learn them if I can stay,'' the child bargained, but the governess was firm, and most unwillingly he went and joined Tottie, who had already found entertainment watching the chickens running after the bits of bread she threw them.

''Sure an't 'tis moighty carreful ye has to be wid the sharrp earrs av the childer,'' Biddy agreed. ''An' oi wuddent furr the wurrld it got back to Mick Phalan that 'twas mesilf as giv ye the warrnin' fur the masther. But oi've hearrd Mick shwear as he'd be aven wid Master Wilfred over the shaap, maybe ye'll hev hearrd pwhat he done?'' she inquired.

Miss Homfrey denied all knowledge of the matter.

''''Tis the shaap Mick's missin' the worrst, the bit av grass an' that wuz neythur herre nor therre, ye'll onderrshtand. But, since the masther's lit his brother mind oop the finee that toight a eat cuddent crape trough harrdly, ye kin fancy Mick's faalin' hurrt about it, too. But 'tis taakin' the shaap away's worse.''

''I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, Biddy,'' Miss Homfrey told her. ''Do you mean Mr. Wilfred has lost or stolen or done away with some of Phelan's sheep?''

''Sure, no, Miss. 'Tis not Mick Phalan's shaap at all oi'm shpaakin' av. 'Tis thim shaap as wuz runnin' in that paddick forninst Mick's land. Pwhat's a shaap more or liss ter the loikes av Mr. Davenant, an' him wid his tousands? Sure he'd niver miss thim if wan wuz ter disappearr from his paddick now an' agin. But ter Mick they

wuz a raal god-sind, wid his shtring av children ter faad, an' him wantin' ter kape his own fur the wool they'd grow ivery yearr. 'Tis not that oi'm wishin' ter do the Phalans a bad turrn that oi'm afther tillin' yez, Miss. 'Tis the misthress bein' so koind ter me, oi'd not shlape sound in me bid at noight, ef oi didn't sind her warrnin' av pwhat's loike ter come av ut."

"And what is likely to come of it, Biddy?" asked Miss Homfrey, who was interested in observing the working of the old woman's strangely warped conscience.

"Oi'll till ye, Miss." Leaning over, she lowered her voice to a whisper. "'Tis loike this. Ef Mick's not ter have the grass an' a shaap now an' agin, he's threatenin' he'll get aven wid the Davenants by burrnin' thim out."

The governess drew back in horror.

"Biddy! What a shocking thing for Mick Phelan to say," she exclaimed.

"Hushoo! thin Miss! fer hivin's sake. Oi'd not be havin' yez think Mick's goin' roun' tillin' it out loud, same as oi'm tillin' yez. But it manes the same thing. An' thin there's his boy Horry—a chip av th' old block is Horry. He's aven more sit aginst that brother av Mr. Davenant's than is Mick hissilf, talks av shootin', he do; says he'd not be surprised if some foine day whin Mr. Wilfred comes roun' this way an accidint ud happen ter him."

"You mean he'd murder him?"

"Not ter call it as bad as that, Miss, oi wuddent, on'y oi jist thought oi'd lit yez know pwhat's been talked on out this way."

"I'll tell Mr. Wilfred, and he can let Mr. Davenant know about it," the governess said.

"An' ye'll till thim not to lit on 'twas mesilf as warrned ye, if ye plaze, Miss. Sure, 'tis havin' ter shlapp wid me oies open oi'd be, if Mick wuz ter foind out oi'd sphoke ter yez."

Miss Homfrey bade Biddy have no fear of her discretion and, calling the children, they drove home again. She

would tell Wilfred that evening, she resolved. She and the children saw more of him than the rest of the household did. For some time now Wilfred had abstained from joining his brother and Kitty at meals, feeling that the latter disapproved of him. He breakfasted early, before the others were up, and usually carried his lunch out with him to where his work lay. On his return, he seldom showed himself in the dining-room, preferring to join the children's tea in the school-room, where he was always sure of a welcome.

Miss Homfrey proved herself his good friend in many ways. His injured hand, healed some time since, thanks to her care, showed only where the burn had been by the scarred, shiny skin. She had also instructed him in the care of his finger nails, and the use of the manicure set he borrowed from Nell. Wilfred carried out all her instructions with the single-heartedness of a callow schoolboy, and took undisguised pleasure in every improvement in his personal appearance suggested by her. Miss Homfrey wondered often what was the motive that governed this desire to rank once again with men of his class. If it were a woman, as was probably the case, who was she? For awhile the governess had fancied that she, herself, was the magnet drawing him back to respectability, and, looking at herself in the mirror, she may have found good reason for the belief, but she gave up that thought after an episode which occurred some weeks back.

She had noticed a rent in the coat he was wearing, and offered to mend it for him. Taking it off, he carefully extracted from an inside pocket a small packet wrapped in soft paper. Then he handed her the coat, with a few words of thanks for her offer. She made no remark at the time in reference to the packet he had removed, but made up her mind to take the first opportunity of discovering the contents, evidently precious to the man. She thought it ought not to be a difficult task, and, duster in hand, she sought his room next morning. Should her presence there be questioned, she could say she was lending a hand to Tilly, the housemaid. It would not be the first time. But a search revealed nothing. Wilfred had

no secret places, no locked cupboards or drawers. He possessed the fewest belongings a man could have—the clothes supplied to him by Stephen on his arrival at Bunglatta, the clothes he had sent for since—and that was all.

Miss Homfrey realised, for the first time, how completely he must have thrown off his former life. She knew, as they all did, that Wilfred arrived without luggage of any sort—dropped from the clouds into their midst. What had become of the clothes he was wearing on the night of his arrival? Even a swaggie has some possessions, something he treasures and carries with him in his wanderings, even if it be only his billy, his bluey and his dog. Wilfred had nothing, unless the mysterious little parcel contained it. Even his former clothes had been seen by none of them, save by Stephen, on the night of his brother's arrival. Miss Homfrey did not doubt they had been destroyed for some reason, though her thoughts were as yet unable to connect her employer's brother with a criminal wanted by the police. Her curiosity was aroused once more by the careful concealment of Wilfred's little packet. Where did he keep it when he changed his coat? He must always transfer it to the coat he was wearing, which pointed to one of two things—either he was afraid of its falling into the hands of others, or else he so valued the contents that he could not bear it elsewhere than on his own person. Was it a likeness of his wife? she wondered, for there was no reason against his being already married, and every likelihood that at some period of his roving life some woman had persuaded him to become her husband. If so, what sort of a woman was she, or if not his wife, perhaps his sweetheart. This might account for his anxiety to appear as attractive as possible in a woman's eyes.

Miss Homfrey set herself to await in patience the first opportunity for examining that precious packet. She was the kind of woman who is not easily turned aside once her purpose is formed. Meanwhile, she made herself useful to Wilfred. He called her a brick for her readiness in helping him, and she had come to treat him as she might treat a grown-up pupil, too old for the school-room

proper, but still welcome there whenever he might care to present himself .

It was the evening of the day old Biddy had delivered her warning, that the governess, waiting till her charges were safe in bed, broached the subject. She repeated what the old woman said, even Horace Phelan's threat to do for Wilfred, without eliciting much more than a cursory acknowledgment for her trouble.

"Won't you do something? Aren't you afraid?" she asked, wondering at the man's indifference to a possible danger.

"You can't expect to disturb a swarm of bees without their buzzing," he told her.

"Or without being stung?" she queried.

"Perhaps—when you don't understand how to handle them."

"And do you? I mean in Phelan's case."

"Miss Homfrey, I lived some years of my life in close touch with such men, as one of themselves," Wilfred told her, "and I know the workings of their mind as well as I know my own. I have felt with them in their bitter class hatred against the rich man of the city, against the big land-owner, against the laws that appear to such men only made for the rich and prosperous on the earth. I've joined in their meetings; have stood up and preached the doctrine of the strike. I've been dubbed a fire-brand by the smug, satisfied leader writers of the high-class respectable newspapers."

"But how dreadful for you!" Miss Homfrey was roused out of herself and forgot her placid pose for once.

"I don't know why I treat you to a glimpse of my past like this—except that I trust you," Wilfred said, and had he been looking at her he would have seen the color flood her cheeks when he spoke of trusting her.

"But I want you to understand how little I regard the threats of men like Phelan. They talk big and threaten for awhile, and it ends in what?"

"Smoke!" she put in.

"Perhaps, in smoke."

"And where there's smoke there's fire," she added.

"I'll be on the look out. In fact, I have been watching Phelan for some time. His son Horace is likely to give more trouble than Phelan himself. If he's caught doing anything against us, he has less to lose, and his youth would get him off."

"It would be terrible if they set fire to the place deliberately. Everything is fearfully dry," she said.

"The house is quite safe," he assured her. "We burnt a good fire-break, and for the grass and fences—well, we must keep our eyes skinned as long as the dry weather lasts."

"You'll let Mr. Davenant know what old Biddy said?" she asked him, as he rose to leave her.

"I may, I'll wait a bit before troubling him, I think. After all, nothing may come from their threats, you know. It may all end in the letting off of hot air."

"But it may not," she reminded him. "Look at the time they burnt the wool-shed at Windfells. The threats were more than hot air."

She never knew whether he heard her, for he made no reply as he went from the school-room.

His confession as to his life gave Miss Homfrey much food for thought. She had guessed something of what he must have gone through, and had heard rumours of passages in his past life that were better forgotten, but never till now had he openly referred to it. She believed it heralded further confidences on his part, till there should be no closed pages of his life which her eyes might not see. Any possibility that he might come to regard her as his good angel in a nearer and dearer sense she had discarded long ago. He was ready to treat her as a friend in need, even in the way he treated his sister, but she suspected from his manner—and that packet—his heart was not free to give.

CHAPTER XVI.

Bush Fires.

Wilfred forgot nothing of the governess's warning, in spite of having made light of the matter. The paddock next the Settlement saw plenty of him, especially when the northerly wind increased the heat of the blazing sun during these days of late December. Fires were not infrequent on the run. Anything might start them, even such a simple means as a bit of broken glass often set fire to the grass, now as dry as tinder, beneath the scorching sunrays. Such constant watchfulness was bound to be rewarded. A series of small fires, some only showing by the scorched grass that they had ever existed, some still not too extensive to be trodden out, drew Wilfred to follow the road to the Settlement. Half-burnt matches lay where some attempts had been made to start these fires. He rode on quickly and overtook young Horace Phelan before he had time to escape. A dogged, sullen expression showed on the boy's freckled face. Wilfred seized him by the collar.

"I've been after you some time, Horace," he said, "and now I've caught you."

"Wot cher givin' us, boss? I ain't doin' nothin'."

"Who started those fires?"

"Wot fires? I don't see none," the boy grumbled, trying vainly to wriggle free.

"Give me those matches," Wilfred ordered.

"I ain't got no matches, s'welp me I ain't."

The man's hand searched till he found the box nearly empty.

"Now I warn you, Horry, if I catch you at this game again, I won't let you off so easily. It'll be a police job next time."

"Yah! you an' your p'lice! Sweet sort you are to set p'lice on to a bloke. You've 'ad 'em on to you before now, if all tales is true."

As Wilfred released him he darted away, calling back insulting epithets from a safe distance.

The man rode on to Phelan's place. It was as well to let him know Horace had been caught red-handed, and had been warned. Mick happened to be away, but Mrs. Phelan came to the door. She was a black-haired, blue-eyed little woman, with the remains of a girlish prettiness that all the hardship and worry of rearing a numerous family on scanty means in the back country had not been able to destroy. A little girl, clinging to her skirt, resembled her in coloring, though she lacked the mother's former beauty.

Wilfred told her what he had discovered, softening the warning somewhat, in pity for the woman's apparent distress. She was full of profuse assertions as to the surprise his words were to her. She couldn't have believed it of Horry.

"It's his father'll give him the trashin' whin he gets back," she promised.

"It won't do him any harm, and may save him from worse," Wilfred told her, thinking what a pity it was that such a pretty little woman could lie so fluently. "Tell Mick I'll be round again soon, and hope to find him at home next time," he said as, raising his hat, he rode away.

"'Tis the foin gentleman he is intirely," Mrs. Phelan told her husband afterwards. "But there, if all the tales as is told of him's thrue, ye can't joodge by lucks. An' to think o' the loikes av him comin' ter me av all people, ter complain av our Horry! What's Horry done compared wid himself? Robbin' our childer av their bit o' meat, an' shuttin' out our shaap from atin' a bit o' grass!"

"Horry, ye're a bigger fool than I tuk ye for," was Mick's comment to his first-born.

"I only done wot you said you'd do," Horry protested.

"Ef I said I'd do it, I never said I'd let that blanky idiot catch me," only Mick did not say "blanky idiot."

That evening Wilfred told his brother of the threats of Phelan, and his son, and the attempt to carry them out.

"You've let them carry on with impunity so long, Steve, they'll not easily be checked now," he said.

"I know. But what could I do? Bolton and Carey were hand in glove with Phelan. They found him useful when they were short-handed. He's a good worker when he chooses, too," said Stephen, regretfully.

"Then do you think I ought to let him go on robbing you?" Wilfred asked, curiously. He began to suspect his brother of the desire to compound a felony, which was to present the strictly law-abiding Stephen Davenant in a new light.

"By no means!" he hastened to reply. "You did quite right, Wilfred, and believe me, I think all the better of you for the way you acted, even though we may have to pay for it," he finished, with a sigh. "Many losses of sheep so far?" he inquired, after a pause.

"A few got bogged in the smaller dam, and almost a dozen got smothered before we could get them all out. It's fenced off now till the rain comes."

"Surely we must have rain before long," Stephen reflected, gloomly.

"It's only the end of December, and I've known it not to break till late March," commented his brother.

Stephen left him to return to the drawing-room, where his wife and Nell were busy with their correspondence.

"I'm writing to Joan. She wants to know when you think of going to Portland, Kitty," Nell was saying, as he entered.

"As soon as we can—it's too hot here now for the children," Mrs. Davenant answered. "Tell her we'll all go down next week."

Stephen sat down by his wife's chair.

"Kitty, have you noticed Wilfred lately?" he asked, taking up a pen and playing with it.

"Wilfred? No, why? I haven't even seen him. He never comes near me."

"He doesn't think you approve of him, I suppose," Stephen said.

"I don't—or at least, I did not. Has he changed?—turned over another new leaf?" and she laughed.

"He's altered a good deal."

"In what way?" his wife demanded, sharply. "For the better?"

"For the better, certainly," her husband told her.

Nell slipped out of the room, not caring to hear her sister-in-law's candid opinion of her brother too openely expressed.

Noticing this, Stephen proceeded: "Do you think there is anything between him and Miss Homfrey?"

"Gracious! I hope not, for her sake," Kitty exclaimed, startled into unintentional rudeness .

"You forget Wilfred is my brother, and I don't consider a Davenant an unsuitable match for a poor governess—not as far as birth goes."

Her husband was hurt and displeased, Kitty saw, and she hastened to make amends.

"If he had remembered what was due to his birth, it would be a different matter," she said. "He didn't give a thought to you and Nell when he chose to bring disgrace on his name. I think you are very long-suffering to have anything more to do with him, Steve," and Kitty turned back to her writing.

"Kitty!" Stephen rose, and, laying down the pen he had been playing with, and the nib of which he had broken, came and stood behind his wife. "I wish you'd try and be a little kind to Wilfred. To please me, Kitty," and he leaned over her chair, his hand resting on her shoulder.

"I'd do a good deal to please you, Steve," Kitty answered, reaching up her hand and pressing his. "Even try and be polite to Wilfred. Tell we what you wish me to say. Am I to wish him joy at his conquest of Louise Homfrey?"

"No, my dear. That was only my surmise. There may be nothing in it after all. Only I notice they are frequently together, and she has no doubt a good influence on him."

"If you are pleased with him, that is the main thing," his wife asserted.

"I am. More than I ever thought to be. He has developed into a first-rate overseer, far and away the best I've known. Nothing escapes him, and he's simply wonderful with the men." Formerly Stephen would have said "the other men." "He knows instinctively how to manage them, and gets twice the work from them Carey ever got. In fact, he's in the black books of some of the settlers for putting a stop to them helping themselves to our sheep."

"He's evidently a paragon in your eyes, Steve," and she rose briskly. "Where is he?" she asked.

"In the dining-room, reading," he told her.

Kitty sought her brother-in-law at once, for, with her to make up her mind, was to act. Wilfred rose as she entered.

"Good evening!" she said, seating herself. "Steve has been singing your praises, Wilfred, telling me how well you are doing lately."

"He's very kind," the man answered, at a loss as to Kitty's purpose in seeking him. She had left him so severely alone lately, that he felt he would prefer to be still ignored rather than encounter her sharp-tongued criticism and disapproving looks.

"He wants to be kind," she affirmed, "and has asked me to induce you to give us more of your company than you do."

Wilfred looked the surprise he felt.

"I thought you, at any rate, Kitty, preferred my absence," he said, lamely.

"Perhaps I did," she acknowledged candidly. "Now, however, I ask you to join us again."

"You really wish it?" he asked, doubtingly.

"Steve wishes it," she told him.

"But you don't!" He spoke bitterly. He was, in her eyes, still the black sheep, the outcast.

Kitty looked at him. Her husband was right. He had changed very considerably for the better. His whole appearance was different. The stoop had almost gone from his shoulders, his eyes no longer shifty or furtive—criminal eyes, Kitty had once dubbed them—now held hers as she looked at him with a glance as bold as her own. And his hands! They were strong and brown still, but unmistakably the hands of a gentleman, Kitty told herself.

"Yes! I wish it, too," she said, and as she spoke she wondered whether Steve was right in thinking that Miss Homfrey's influence was responsible for this throwing off of the man's former self, this acquisition of a new and healthy personality. "Women have accomplished wonderful things before now," she reflected, silently.

"Then I'll come," Wilfred answered, as he took the hand she held out to him.

So, once again, he found himself accepted of his own people, and took his place in the household as a welcome member and not merely on sufferance. He joined the grown-ups in the dining-room instead of taking his meals alone, or with the children. He heard scraps of talk that set his blood speeding in his veins, of Joan and her doings. They spoke freely as before one of themselves, with no personal interest in the mistress of Windfells. From one or other of them he learned that Joan was feeling the unusually trying weather, and was going to join the Davenant party in Portland. Or Joan had intended coming to Bunglatta for New Year's Eve only one of the ponies had gone lame. Or Joan wrote that the new shed was to be begun next month, as soon as the holidays were

over, and Mr. Rawlins advised her to have the new building on a more convenient plan than the old one.

Wilfred sat and drank in every word, feeling that the world was very good to live in, despite the heat, the flies, the mosquitoes, and other trials of our glorious Australian summer. The old sun waxed hotter and more brazenly unbearable day by day, while the poor stock showed their sufferings dumbly in their pleading eyes and protruding bones, pathetically patient till they gave up the struggle for existence against adverse Destiny, and literally dropped out of life.

Miss Homfrey refused to take a holiday this year, and Kitty was not sorry. It would lighten her own labors to have the governess at the sea-side to take charge of the children. Teddy and Tottie were all excitement for days before their departure, packing up and unpacking half a dozen times every twenty-four hours, the treasures that they must not leave behind.

It was the day previous to the family's departure, and the hottest day they had so far experienced. The thermometer in the hall gave the temperature 105 deg.

Tired out and exhausted with the heat and excitement, the children sat, white-faced and fretful, at the mid-day meal. They had been brought into the dining-room for it to-day, the school-room being too hot. In vain Miss Homfrey spread the melted oil from the butter-dish on the thinnest of bread for sandwiches to tempt the vanished appetites. In vain she placed stewed fruit, well sugared, on their plates. Wilfred, who had returned from a long round, begun at four o'clock that morning, to take advantage of the cooler hours, watched with admiration the infinite patience displayed by the governess. His remark upon it drew Kitty's attention, and she remembered Steve's suggestion, but all she said was—

"I'll be very thankful when we get away to-morrow. This weather's enough to knock anyone up."

"You'll have to go without me, I'm afraid," her husband announced. "There's too much danger of fires this season to leave," he added, when she demurred at his words.

"But can't Wilfred look after the place without you staying on, too, Steve?" she asked.

"I'm quite willing to be left if Steve wishes to get away," Wilfred offered.

"I'll come down later on," Mr. Davenant promised. "There are fires not far off at this moment, and, with the wind as at present, there's no saying what may happen."

"There was no fire nearer than twelve or fourteen miles to the north of us," his brother informed him. "I went over in that direction this morning."

"There's heavy smoke showing over towards the Settlement," Stephen told him.

"That's blowing across from the ranges. There's been a fire burning there for the past week. I was at the Settlement before breakfast," Wilfred added.

"Is Phelan still away?"

"Yes—and the son, too—at least so his wife told me."

Mr. Davenant breathed a sigh of relief.

Less than ten minutes later a man galloped up to the house with a message for the boss. A fire had broken out in the Settlement paddock, and was sweeping down towards the homestead.

With a smothered oath Wilfred was out and astride the man's horse, racing for the scene of the fire. Men were already at work, beating it out, but the flames, fanned by the fierce wind, came on in spite of them.

A hasty glance satisfied Wilfred that neither Phelan nor his eldest son were among them. He concluded the woman may have spoken the truth that morning, though the thing looked suspicious. He worked with the men—station hands and neighboring selectors—burning on and beating out in front of the line of fire. The whole of the grass on that part of the run must be sacrificed, he knew, to save the rest. It was killing work in that blazing heat. A man went down close to him, almost on to the burning grass. Wilfred pulled him out of danger, telling a mate to splash his head and face with water.

"Take him back," he ordered, as soon as the man had recovered sufficiently to sit a horse, "and take my coat, put it in my room, yourself," to the youth who took it from him.

Miss Homfrey saw the young fellow approach the house, after leaving the patient in the hut-keeper's charge. She went to meet him.

"How are they succeeding at the fire?" she inquired.

"'Avin' an 'ot time, Miss," he told her. "The boss give me this 'ere coat to take to 'is room, Miss."

"Give it to me, and I'll take it," she said, perhaps a thought too eagerly, for the youth hesitated.

"'E says as 'ow I wuz to put it in 'is room meself."

"Nonsense, Jim. Give it to me and go back to the fire. They'll want all the help they can get," and, taking the garment from him, she turned back towards Wilfred's part of the house.

She did not go direct to his room. She had felt the packet in the inner coat-pocket, and the opportunity so long sought to examine it now lay to her hand. In the privacy of her own room she drew it forth and undid the string that bound it. The tissue paper round it was limp and worn looking. Unfolding it she gazed at the contents —a photograph of Joan Fetherston taken some years back. She had seen it before in Nell Davenant's album. But there was something else in the packet. A tiny fold of stiffer paper was there. She opened it, and took out a little gold ring, set with pink coral.

Miss Homfrey surveyed her find in deep thought for some moments. What connection, she wondered, could there be between the photograph and the ring, for the latter told her nothing as yet. But the photograph of Joan Fetherston! Here was a mystery indeed. Had she given it to him herself, perhaps in former years, or was it the same she had seen in Miss Davenant's possession? She understood they had never met before Joan paid that visit on Tottie's birthday. Miss Homfrey cudgelled her brain to try and recall all that she had seen pass

between Wilfred and the girl. There was nothing on Joan's part, but the merest civility to her host's brother. Then the key to the puzzle must remain in the man's keeping. It was evident he had fallen in love with Joan, but where, and when? And what had the ring to do with it? Miss Homfrey allowed herself to show more interest than she usually displayed over other people's business.

It was certainly quite worth while giving up her holiday, she decided, to solve this riddle. It promised to prove highly interesting. She was going to derive more amusement from it than if she had taken a four weeks' trip to town or elsewhere with friends she cared little about, or relations who cared less about her. Besides, this would cost her nothing, whereas boarding-houses would absorb more of her carefully hoarded savings than she cared to spend. For she knew she must save every penny she earned.

She wrapped up the ring and photograph and, returning them to their hiding-place, carried the coat to Wilfred's room. No one had seen her, and he would never guess at her discovery of his secret. If she had ever let herself care for him, she reflected, she might have felt horribly jealous. But she never had, so she only felt her curiosity pleasantly excited.

It was nearly nine o'clock when Wilfred and the other fire-fighters, dirty, begrimed, and half blinded by smoke, returned. The wind had veered about sunset, carrying the fire back towards the Settlement houses, and he and the rest had been working hard to save Phelan's property and stock.

"Poor Mrs. Phelan! How frightened she must have been, and Mick and Horace away, too," Kitty said, sympathetically.

"It was untrue. They were there all the time," Wilfred told her. "As soon as the fire attacked their own place, they came crawling out like foxes from their holes."

"Do you think they started the fire?" his brother asked.

"I'm positive they did, only there's nothing to prove it. There wasn't a sign of fire anywhere near when I left

this morning. At any rate, there's some satisfaction in knowing they haven't got off scot free. They've lost some fencing and a few sheep,'' he concluded.

''And what about old Biddy?'' someone asked.

''She was a real heroine, keeping us all going, bringing us tea and water; wanted to help beat out, too. It didn't go as far as her place.''

Wilfred left them, saying he wanted a bath and bed before he was fit for anything more.

Mrs. Davenant provided boracic lotion for the men's eyes, and the household retired early, having a six-mile drive the following morning to the train terminus.

Miss Homfrey was probably the last to close her eyes that night. She had too much food for speculation, and looked forward to an entertaining time ahead.

CHAPTER XVII.

Holidays by the Sea.

Joan and Mrs. Robson were waiting at the station when the wagonette from Bunglatta arrived. They had come to Colterton the previous day, and put up at the hotel for the night.

The children greeted Miss Fetherston with shouts of glee, and began pouring forth all their plans for the holidays, taking possession of her so that she could give but a hasty greeting to the rest.

Stephen Davenant drove his family, leaving Wilfred to come on with the luggage in another trap. He arrived shortly before the train started, and having seen the luggage safely in the van, lingered in the background, unnoticed by the rest till Miss Homfrey said:

"Children, if you want seats next the window, you had better get in," at which there was a scamper of feet and Joan was left alone. The governess looked at Wilfred Davenant, who had no eyes for anyone but Miss Fetherston, and she waited, thinking surely now he would come forward. But he remained where he was, and as the girl, in obedience to Tottie's invitation to sit next her, moved to enter the carriage, Miss Homfrey stopped her.

"I think Mr. Wilfred is waiting to speak to you," she suggested.

Joan turned, but, seeing nobody near answering the description of the Wilfred Davenant she remembered, asked where he was.

"You don't remember me, Miss Fetherston?" he said, raising his hat.

"I'm sorry. I didn't recognise you in the shadow," she answered, giving him her hand. But, as she saw him more clearly, she told herself it was not only the shadow. The man was changed, and changed for the better. Though

looking fagged and weary after the strenuous fight yesterday, he showed the self-possession of a man with an assured place in the world. His eyes were swollen and bloodshot from the smoke, but they held her own in a steady glance, while their hands met.

Miss Homfrey had taken her place beside Teddy, whence she watched the meeting. It was short, for the bell rang presently, and the porter's "take your seats, please," parted them.

"Good-bye, Uncle Wilfred; good-bye, Daddy!" screamed the children, as the train rolled slowly from the platform.

"I want Joan next me," Tottie announced, finding Mrs. Robson in that seat. But Miss Homfrey, out of consideration for the girl's light summer frock, which would be damaged by Tottie's shoes, more often on the seat than the floor, intervened.

"And how is Lavinia?" Mrs. Robson inquired. She knew just how to talk to children, or thought she did.

Tottie's big blue eyes grew round with puzzled surprise. Teddy kicked her, at which she grew annoyed and kicked back.

"Stupid!", said Teddy. "She means that doll."

"The doll I sent you for your birthday that you named Lavinia," Mrs. Robson explained.

"I didn't. I called her Joan," Tottie contradicted.

The old lady looked grieved.

"Tottie's dolls frequently indulge in a change of names, Mrs. Robson," put in the governess. "All the same, Tottie, Mrs. Robson's doll is called Lavinia," and something in the governess's voice made the children think of Gordon's poems, and they were silent for quite two minutes.

"How much your brother has altered, Nell—improved, I mean." It was Joan who spoke. She and her friend sat together, and could talk without raising their voices, except when the train was unusually noisy.

"Yes, we all notice it. Steve thinks no end of him. I'm so thankful it has turned out so. I was afraid he would only be a failure again when he came back to us looking so —so—different," Nell ended, awkwardly. "Whatever his life has been all these years it left its mark on him, poor fellow."

"He never speaks about it, I suppose?" Joan asked.

"His past life? No, never, and I, for one, would rather not know," Nell answered. "It only makes me sad to think of wasted years."

"They were wasted, I suppose?" Joan said.

"It might have been better had they been wasted only, but I'm afraid it was even worse. I dread to think about it, and Steve has never said anything to me, though I feel certain he knows."

"You don't mean you're afraid he has done wrong—broken the law?" Joan hardly liked even putting into words the suggestion Nell hinted at, but she was her friend and knew the question was not prompted by idle curiosity.

"I don't know, Joan, but I'm afraid, and that's the truth. I'm afraid."

Miss Homfrey, in her seat next to Teddy, appeared to be absorbed in a book, but, though she turned the pages at intervals, she could not have told what the story was about. Her ears caught only part of the conversation between Joan and Nell, but she heard sufficient to excite her curiosity, already aroused by her discovery of Miss Fetherston's photograph. If Wilfred was in love with Joan, the girl, Miss Homfrey felt certain, knew nothing of it. Neither, probably, did Miss Davenant, or she would not have spoken of her brother as she did.

On the contrary, she would strive to make her brother appear in as favorable light as possible in Joan's eyes.

The journey, which occupied about five hours, and necessitated a change of trains, proved a tedious one for high-spirited children. Teddy and his sister behaved fairly well as long as they had objects of interest to view

from the windows. When they became restless, Miss Homfrey produced sandwiches and lemonade—thermos flasks, though not unknown at that date, had not come into general use.

"I'm thankful we have you with us," Mrs. Davenant told the governess. "Last year they walked all over me and nearly drove me mad."

But the longest journey has an end, and the daylight had not yet departed when they steamed into the station at Portland, and the sea lay before them.

. . . . . .

"I'm thankful Kitty and the children are away out of this heat," Stephen Davenant remarked, as he and his brother, stretched on cane lounges in the verandah, were enjoying their after-dinner pipe.

"Don't you miss them horribly? I do," Wilfred said, recalled from his silent thoughts by his brother's words. In his mind he saw again his liege lady as she had appeared that morning on the railway platform. Her blue muslin—strange in all his memories of her she was clad in blue—fresh as the morning, a neat, close-fitting travelling hat hid the glory of her hair with the exception of the little tendril curls about her forehead. Unconsciously he felt the packet in his coat pocket when he thought of her hair. It was always with him, that stolen photograph. And she had not recognised him! Was he to take it as a compliment that she thought him different from her former recollections of Nell's brother? Or was it that her indifference towards him had left no abiding memories of his person? Probably the latter, he reflected, in which case he owed a debt of gratitude to Miss Homfrey for drawing Miss Fetherston's attention to his presence.

"What do you think of Miss Homfrey?" Stephen's voice broke in on his meditations.

"She's a brick," he answered so emphatically, the query synchronising with his thoughts, that Stephen was startled.

"She's a good girl, splendid with the children, but we don't know much about her," he said, cautiously.

"No?" Wilfred's thoughts had gone back to Joan, he had none to spare for another.

His brother felt uneasy. He did not want to speak against the governess, but if Wilfred was thinking of her as a wife it would be as well to find out more about her first.

"No," he said, "Kitty got her through a governess's agency, or rather a friend got her for Kitty. She doesn't seem to have anyone belonging to her. Most girls have some relatives somewhere," he said, half apologetically. "Haven't they?" as his brother did not answer. He was afraid he might feel hurt at his comments.

"Eh? Relations! Oh, yes! Of course. Everyone has," Wilfred agreed, and fell back into his reverie again.

"I just said Miss Homfrey appears not to have any," Stephen repeated.

"Much better without—relations only a nuisance."

Stephen Davenant sat up, bringing his feet down on the boards with a thump. "I think, Wilfred, that statement shows an unpardonable lack of feeling of—of gratitude," he said, coldly.

His brother, at a loss for his meaning, stared at the indignant expression on Stephen's face, then he realised what his words conveyed.

"A thousand pardons, Steve, old man, but I'm afraid I wasn't paying attention to what you said. Of course, I didn't mean that. Where should I be now, but for you and all your goodness? It was only that I—that I was thinking of something else and didn't listen."

"But you answered as if you were listening," Stephen told him.

"Didn't follow, I should have said," Wilfred corrected. "I'm half asleep, really," he laughed, rising and stretching his arms. "Dull company for you, old man. You'd better have gone to Portland with the rest."

"And left you to the tender mercies of Mick Phelan and his son!"

"Was that why you stayed behind?" Wilfred asked.

"Partly," his brother told him.

The mutual companionship drew them together as nothing else could have done. Stephen Davenant, in those days of constant watchfulness for the possibility of fires, of tireless work under the blazing sun, of destroyed fencing that must be repaired without delay, of stock to be cared for, came to look upon his brother as more than his right hand. He was more like a second self. Had he been owner of Bunglatta he could not have done more. Then the way he understood the men was a standing wonder to Stephen. They appeared to know instinctively that it was no use trying to outwit the boss's brother. He knew and could see through them, from the crown of their hat to their boot-soles. Nothing was hidden from his knowledge. They would do a better day's work under his eyes than for another man. Stephen himself could not get half the service from his employees that Wilfred contrived to get, and that without any bullying. He found a stronger weapon in sarcasm than in violent language.

"It's when the boss's brother comes the funny racket with you, you crumple up and feel like lookin' round for a mouse 'ole."

"My oath! Uses you like 'e might 'is tooth-brush."

The men respected him none the less, and worked willingly for him. They discussed among themselves the various rumours afloat of his life in the past—of wild doings in the West and other States, but such things did not detract from his influence over them. They knew he had been as one of themselves, and they saw that he knew them and their fellows inside out. No use trying to hoodwink him, or, as the Yankees more clumsily express it, "pull the wool over his eyes."

The days that brought letters from the family were pleasant breaks in the lives of the two men left behind. Wilfred devoured Nell's letters, which generally made refer-

ence to her friend's doings as well as her own. It was from the children's smudgy and blotted scrawls, however, that he learnt most of that which he longed to hear. Both Teddy and Tottie wrote of little else than Joan, but the man could not guess their letters were prompted by the governess.

"I'm glad they're having such a jolly time," Stephen said, re-folding Kitty's long epistle with a sigh. He had been reading it to his brother.

"Why don't you go down, too? The place will be all right now, and the holiday will do you good," Wilfred suggested.

"I was going to make the same proposal to you," his brother said. "You're pretty fagged out lately. Run down to Portland for a couple of weeks. It will do you all the good in the world. I know they'll be glad to have you with them."

Wilfred did not reply for a minute or two. The temptation to join them, to meet Miss Fetherston daily, was hard to resist. He pictured her there on the beach, or in a boat, or driving for picnics, or indulging in other amusements, and he always saw her clad in her blue frock—blue as the sea at her feet, or the sky overhead—and now Stephen, like the good fellow he was, offered him the chance of entering paradise! If he only dared! But the risk was too great.

"You're awfully good, Steve, and ——" he paused, afraid of saying too much—"but I daren't. I'm safe here where I'm not likely to come in contact with people who might recognise me. But there, in the crowd, I'd be living in dread all the time. Every time I see a stranger coming up the road I want to get into hiding until I know who it is."

"You feel like that still?" Stephen said.

"I'll feel like it all my life, Steve—till—till the blow falls," he added, gloomily.

"But surely there's no danger now—after all this time?" his brother remarked.

"There's always danger. Do you remember that old Greek Johnny we used to read about, with the sword hanging over him always suspended by a hair?"

"Damocles?"

"Yes. Well, I feel like him. If you had turned me over to the police instead of taking me in that night, I hadn't a hope of escape. There was a big account against the name I went by, and nothing in my favor. Now it's different. I've got something to my credit. I'm working to build up a good name. I've earned your good opinion, Steve, and made the men about here respect me. I hope this will all tell in my favor, if—when the time comes," he added.

"There's one thing I have often wished to ask you, only I didn't care to pry into your affairs," began his brother.

"Ask anything you like, Steve. I owe you too much to refuse to answer any question I can."

"Then—when you made up your mind to give up your old life and came here to me, was it only because you found yourself in a hole, or was it for another reason?"

"There was another reason," Wilfred replied. "I'd been in holes before, and got out of them without help."

"Had the other reason anything to do with a woman?"

"Yes," his brother answered.

"Women have great influence if they only know how to use it for good. I hope she is worthy of you, Wilfred," Stephen said.

"Worthy of me! Why, Steve, old chap, I'm not fit to lick the dust off her shoes!" which, considering that Stephen Davenant had Miss Homfrey in his thoughts, he considered an over-drawn statement to make about the

governess—a girl with no relations, moreover. But all he said was:

"Then you don't feel inclined to take a trip down to the others?"

"I dare not, Steve."

Thus Wilfred found himself left in charge of Bunglatta, the rich sheep station, to which he had come a few months previously little better than the most poverty stricken sundowner, while Stephen Davenant, the owner, left for the seaside holiday in perfect confidence that all would go well during his absence.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Proves Bertie a Hero.

"Who do you think is coming here and going to bring her children?" Mrs. Davenant had just got the mail, and held a letter on thick grey paper in her hand, as she addressed the others.

"It looks like Trot Wilcocks's writing," Nell observed, looking up from her own correspondence.

"It is. They're coming down to-morrow."

"And Bertie Wells, too?" Nell asked, with a mischievous glance at Joan.

"She doesn't say. But I think she's sure to bring him. She's throwing him at all the girls she thinks are worth while, hoping one may take pity on him and carry him to the altar before George Wilcocks gets full up and kicks him out."

Kitty had a sharp tongue, which spared nobody.

Nell hastened to put in a plea.

"I think Mr. Wells is not at all a bad sort," she said. "He is good-nature personified."

"Do you want him?" asked Kitty, sharply. "Because, if you care to take him, I'll bet anything Trot will bring him to your feet at once—if you let her know."

"Don't be vulgar, Kitty," her sister-in-law admonished. "I needn't want to marry every man I call a good sort."

"Seems to me you don't want to marry anyone, the way you keep them all at a distance."

"Nell's like me, happy as she is," Joan interposed, quickly. "We intend ending our lives together as two old maids—like the friends of Llangollan. Don't we, Nell?"

"Oh, you!" Kitty turned away in disgust. "Haven't we seen Mr. Rawlins ready to eat out of your hand, and Bertie Wells following you round like a poodle-dog?"

"I'll simply refuse to stay and listen to you being rude any longer," Joan said, rising. "Come along, Nell, we'll leave her," and the two went off together, Nell unhappy at the knowledge that the accusation was nothing but the truth.

The Wilcocks family duly arrived, including George Wilcocks, a long, lean man, with a sombre expression of countenance that concealed the tremendous admiration his breezy wife inspired in him. He was as quiet as she was lively. With them arrived Bertie Wells and Spot, the children's Australian terrier.

"They refused to leave him behind," Trot announced, as the dog made a bee line for the bows on Mrs. Robson's shoes. "And I knew he'd be a nuisance. Mollie and Annie, catch him at once, and shut him up in your room."

"Dogs not allowed in bedrooms, Mum," a smart boy in buttons informed her. "I'll tike 'im and chine 'im up in the yard," and despite the children's protests, poor Spot was condemned to durance vile.

"Awf'ly jolly seein' you again, Miss Joan," and Bertie's expressive face was one continuous smile.

The girl welcomed him with extra warmth, possibly in consequence of Kitty's cutting remarks.

"We're having an awfully good time down here, and hope you and the Wilcockses will come with us to Cape Nelson to-morrow," Joan told him.

"Charmed, I'm sure—if Trot's not too tired, don't cher know."

"Nonsense, Bertie! Of course I won't be, and if I am you can go without me." Mrs. Wilcocks was not going to let slip the chance of providing for her cousin this time, if she could help it.

The drive to Cape Nelson was only one of many similar expeditions, the weather holding up well that summer—too well for the drought-stricken pastoralists. The children grew fat and sunburnt over their roses. They bathed, paddled, built sand-castles and fished, and scattered shells on the bed-room floors till the housemaid

threatened to give the proprietor notice. In fact, they lived in the open air enjoying every minute, as did in hardly less degree Bertie Wells, though he did not succeed in attaching himself to Miss Fetherston as constantly as he would have wished. Joan found Trot Wilcocks a less troublesome companion, and Bertie became the playmate of the children, who received him into almost as much favor as they did Spot, their constant companion everywhere except within the walls of the hotel.

Bertie was an adept at swimming, and Trot thought the chance of having her children taught also was too good to be missed. Every morning, Bertie, followed by the four little ones, and preceded by Spot, could be seen going down to the sea. Miss Homfrey joined them sometimes, but declared that she did not require lessons, having lived during her childhood within access of the sea. Like most Australians from the sea board, she could swim almost as soon as she could walk.

Bertie organised "water tournaments," as he called them, among the children, in which Spot was sometimes made to take part, most unwillingly. He preferred racing along the beach to immersion in salt water, which got into his mouth and didn't taste like the water he knew at home. Other children staying in the place joined in, till Bertie had quite a large contingent under his care.

"Such a charming man that Mr. Wells, so good-natured with the children. One feels they are quite safe if he's there," the mothers told each other, enjoying the interval of freedom for themselves.

Mrs. Wilcocks, however, was by no means so satisfied.

"I didn't bring Bertie down here to play nurse-maid to other people's children," she told Kitty, in a confidential moment. "Of course, you know he's been awfully gone on Joan Fetherston ever since he met her at your place, and I did hope, being thrown so much together down here, something might come of it."

Mrs. Davenant laughed. "I always thought you wanted Nell for him," she said.

"Well, of course, I'd have loved it, personally, only you see ——"

"Only he preferred Joan, I know. And now, as he can't get her either, he has to be content with the children and Louise Homfrey for company."

"I do hope he won't do anything foolish. That Miss Homfrey looks just the sort of woman to try and ensnare an unsuspecting boy like Bertie. Don't you think so?" asked Mrs. Wilcocks.

"No, I don't. I'm sure she'd never trouble her head about Mr. Wells. Besides, Stephen has an idea there may be something between her and Wilfred," Kitty told her.

"What! Your brother-in-law? 'The picturesque ruffian,' as Bertie calls him? With red cap and sash and striped stockings, he says he'd be the picture of a stage pirate."

"Not now," Kitty informed her. "He's quite presentable—rather good-looking, in fact."

"All the Davenants are that. The wonder is he has never married," Trot said. "It would be funny if a wife turned up and claimed him, wouldn't it?"

"Don't suggest such a thing!" exclaimed Kitty.

"But if she were presentable?"

"No nice girl would have had anything to say to Wilfred at one time—before he came back," she amended.

"I never heard where he was before he appeared at Bunglatta," Trot ventured to hint.

"Neither did I," answered the other, not intending to gratify her curiosity. "Steve no doubt can tell you, or Wilfred himself. I never asked either."

"He seems to have just dropped from the clouds."

"Or risen from the depths," Kitty said, and she was relieved when the advent of a couple of strangers put an end to the conversation.

"A honeymoon couple, I'm told, though you'd never suspect it. They look like mother and son," Mrs. Wil-

cocks told her later. "See how she watches him for fear he will speak to the girls. Your Miss Homfrey seems to attract him most. She was a rich widow—nursed him in her arms when he was a baby, they say. He, of course, is as poor as they make them—it's a case of kidnapping, ought to be made punishable by law."

. . . . . .

Among the young folks to whom Bertie acted as instructor was Jim McTravers, a weedy, undersized youth of fifteen, only son of a wealthy New South Wales station-owner. He was on a visit to the house of some friends, and, being petted and spoilt by five sisters, all older than himself, had got rather out of control. Bertie Wells, inculcated a wholesome fear in the lad by threats of holding his head under water, and half-drowning him if he did not obey orders.

Young McTravers was eager to become a swimmer, and being endowed by nature with the courage born of ignorance, imagined his natatory powers greater than was the case. One afternoon, being badly beaten in a swimming match by Mollie Wilcocks, in the presence of a large number of onlookers, he resolved to retrieve his defeat by displaying his ability to swim to a greater distance from shore than Mr. Wells ever permitted his pupils to attempt alone. Calling an admonition to keep to the shallows on account of a dangerous undertow, Bertie left the water.

On the beach the loungers took little notice once the match was over. It was Miss Homfrey who first saw the boy's plight.

Out beyond the breakers, unable to make head against the back-wash, he was struggling and trying to attract notice, the noise of the waves drowning his cries.

Miss Homfrey jumped up and ran—the first time Nell and Joan had seen her run. She usually glided or walked, but now she ran, at a good pace, too, to Mr. Wells's dressing-shed. He had nearly finished dressing when she burst in on him. Not waiting an instant, shedding coat and waistcoat as he ran, he plunged in. To the onlookers it

seemed an infinity of time before he reached the drowning boy, for he was drowning—they never doubted that.

A thrill of thankfulness went through the spectators as Bertie was seen to grasp the boy and make for the shore, where several willing helpers, joining hands, made a living line to aid the rescuer.

Young McTravers was brought out in a state of collapse, but revived sufficiently under Bertie's treatment, and that of a hastily summoned doctor, to be taken to his friends' home.

Bertie Wells became the hero of the hour.

Nobody could say too much in his praise. Mrs. Wilcocks congratulated herself that now, surely, Joan would yield after witnessing such an act of bravery. The probability is that, had Bertie seized the opportunity of asking the girl while her feelings were stirred to admiration of his act, she would have given him her hand. But, being before all things a true-born English gentleman, Bertie Wells chose rather to "play the game," than take advantage of a fleeting wave of sentiment on the girl's side. Moreover, he bore his fame modestly, discounting any "fuss."

"Anybody 'ud think he'd been in the habit of pulling out drowning people all his life," grumbled one young man envious of Bertie's luck.

"Perhaps he has," Trot Wilcocks informed him. "I know he already holds the silver medal of the Royal Humane Society, though he doesn't talk about it."

Hearing of which made Bertie protest.

"Too bad of Trot, givin' a fellah away like that, don't cher know?"

CHAPTER XIX.

Miss Homfrey Does Some Thinking.

A few days before the end of their holiday Joan received a letter which caused her much perturbation of spirit. It came from Tom Rawlins, and in it he told her of the renewal of a previous offer from his old friend of a working partnership in a property in Queensland, with additional tempting conditions.

He felt he ought not to turn such a chance down a second time, though he would stay on at Windfells until she had found a suitable man to take his place.

Joan felt she could not make up her mind to lose him, to let him go away now that she had come to rely on him so much. She sat down and penned a reply to his letter, laying down the impossibility of her giving her consent to his suggestion. He must refuse the offer from his friend, and she, Joan, must try to make it up to him in some other way. When she had finished she read it through. Then she tore it up, for such a letter she saw might convey more to him than she had it in her power to give. The few lines she eventually sent him were couched in a friendly, non-committal vein, that could raise no false hopes in his heart. She congratulated him on his improved prospects, wishing him luck in the new venture, and thanking him for remaining at Windfells until she found someone to fill his place, though this, she told him, would be difficult. She decided not to tell Nell yet of Rawlins's projected departure from the district. She would have her at Windfells to stay with her as soon as they left the seaside. She was sure Nell would come.

Miss Homfrey showed an interest in the arrangement.

"It's nice having a friend you can see so much of, and yet not get bored," she commented, "and rather unusual among women. Now, if it had been Miss Davenant's brother ——"

"But I hardy know Nell's brother," Joan told her. "And I'm sure he'd bore me far more than Nell ever could."

"How can you tell that if, as you say, you hardly know him, Miss Fetherston?"

"Oh, because women bore me less than men do, I suppose, though you'll probably not agree with me."

The governess did not answer. She had stopped to gaze in a shop window filled with a varied assortment of fancy goods. Joan stopped also to see what had attracted the other's eyes.

A row of colored bead necklaces hung before them.

"What pretty beads—the coral ones I mean," the governess said. "Have you ever seen coral used as a setting for rings?" and she held her breath for the answer.

"I had a ring set with pink coral. Nell gave it to me."

"May I see it sometime?" Miss Homfrey requested, knowing before Joan spoke what the answer would be.

"I'm sorry, but I lost it."

"Lost it—when?" and she tried to appear cool.

"The night our shed was burnt. I had it on, unfortunately, and ——" She paused.

"Yes?" The governess was all ears.

"I just lost it. The men and Mr. Rawlins made a thorough search for it, but of course it was never found."

"Of course not," Miss Homfrey echoed, as they continued their way back to the hotel.

That night she did a bit of thinking out, and piecing together parts of a complicated puzzle. She had found the key at last, and the pieces fitted into each other perfectly. She began to wonder in what way she could benefit by her discovery. For that is what it amounted to—a discovery of value, or that could be used to obtain value. Some people in her position would have looked upon it as a gold mine, but she was not one of that sort—not at present, anyway. If hard pushed she could not say what she might

be tempted to do. But for the present all her energies must be employed in keeping the secret to herself. She wondered how many other people knew the truth. Stephen Davenant—certainly; his wife—possibly; Nell—she was doubtful how much or how little Nell knew, for Miss Davenant was not a communicative person, and effectually locked her opinions up in her own keeping. Though Miss Homfrey saw her more frequently and more intimately than either of the others, she felt she could read both Mr. Davenant and Kitty more easily than Nell.

Joan Fetherston, she was sure, had no inkling of the truth, for she was open as the day and, had she suspected Wilfred Davenant's identity, she must have revealed her knowledge during these weeks of close companionship at the seaside.

On the whole Louise Homfrey felt every reason to feel satisfied with herself. A slip on her part, a careless question even, might have led others to guess at her discovery. Now, however, she held in her own keeping the knowledge that meant power. She had good reason to congratulate herself. It had come at the right moment, too. A certain friend of hers in Queensland, from whom she received periodical letters, had been writing lately hinting at the necessity of his being able to lay his hands on a considerable sum of ready money in the near future—two hundred pounds was the amount stated by her correspondent, who signed himself "Your loving Bob."

His last letter inquired if she couldn't manage to "bluff the old Guy" (meaning Stephen Davenant) "for the needful." She had replied, declining to ask her employer for it, but offering all her own savings, amounting to nearly a hundred pounds, for Bob Grigg's purpose. She had chosen to give up her summer holiday in order to preserve this sum intact in the Savings Bank. Lastly, she had begged Bob to try to obtain a loan from his friends of the extra hundred.

She was still awaiting his reply when the Portland visit came to an end, and, Mr. Davenant, having joined the family for the final week, brought his party home to Bung-

latta. Wilfred's welcome was a hearty one. He had missed them all sadly, he told them.

"I suppose you haven't a button left on your clothes," Miss Homfrey said, when he tried to make her understand how dull the place had been during their absence. "You seem so glad to have us back."

He assured her he had managed to keep his things in repair, and there was nothing sordid about his welcome.

He looked for Miss Fetherston at Colterton station, but she had gone straight through with Mrs. Robson and Nell before he got there. Miss Homfrey saw the disappointment in his face. How transparent he was, she thought, now that she knew.

There was a letter for her, he told the governess, arrived the previous day, and he handed her an envelope bearing a Queensland post mark. As she took it from him, her conscience pricked her. He was absolutely so unsuspecting, and yet, within that envelope, what might there not be hidden? She seemed to see Wilfred Davenant in apparent security, but all the time on the edge of a dangerous chasm, and to realise that her hand might be the one to push him over to destruction.

She carried the letter to her own room to read, when she should be alone, but first there was so much to be seen to, the luggage to be unpacked and put away, the children to be got ready for their tea, and her own travelling dress to be changed. Each one had so much to tell and to hear. The chatter of the children rang in her ears till her head ached. It was not till late that night, when at last she found herself alone, that she drew forth her letter. It was urgent. Bob had raised every penny he could, but was still two hundred pounds short.

"It's a case—if not of life or death, still of riches or poverty," he wrote. "Send along the stuff now and I'll be a made man, set up for life, able to start our married life in comfort. Lord knows, Lou, we've waited for it long enough. We deserve some luck, old girl, after our long grind. But see, Lou—miss this chance and the deuce

can say if we ever have another. And it will perhaps be good-bye for yours truly, for I don't feel as if I can go on fighting much longer, and nothing to show for it all. So don't fail me, Lou, old girl. Get it out of the old bloke. You say he's rich—get it by hook or by crook—fair means or foul, only get it. Tell him it will only be a loan. He'll get it back as soon as the bally mine starts paying—get it back with interest, tell him. As soon as this reaches you, Lou, wire me the stuff's on the way and I'll go slap bang into the thing straight away. So long, old girl. Don't fail me now. Send it, if you have to pawn your hope of eternal salvation. Your husband that is to be, Bob."

No need for the governess to read it through a second time. No need to consider what she would do. She had no choice. That was very certain. Her own future was at stake. Any sentimental consideration for others must take second place. She and Bob Griggs had waited so long. He had always been hopeful, and she had been buoyed up by his unconquerable faith—faith in himself, faith in their future had been his watchword. After all they had gone through their luck must turn at last. And they had been patient so long! No, she couldn't let anything stand in the way now. If the securing of her own future happiness entailed the sacrifice of Wilfred Davenant, then Wilfred must suffer. Nor would she experience any compunction in using his prostrate body as a step to attain her ends —or so she told herself. Possibly, had she allowed herself to consider the future she might have felt some qualms of conscience.

Folding up the letter she returned it methodically to its envelope. She need not sit up to-night to answer it. A telegram to-morrow would be quicker—that was how he wished it answered. She locked the letter away in a drawer. Although there might be no one in the house likely to pry into her correspondence, she reflected it was safer to keep that kind of communication under lock and key.

She was tired with the long journey and the fatigue of unpacking her own and the children's luggage, but it was long before her eyes closed in sleep that night. When they did, her rest was troubled with dreams, confused phantas-

magoria of the day past. When she awoke next morning, unrefreshed, with a splitting headache, she feared that after all she might be too ill to accomplish her purpose that day, and Bob might wait in vain for her wire, and so miss the chance of his—of their—life. Dragging herself out of bed, she mixed some sal-volatile and drank it. That enabled her to go through breakfast, though Mrs. Davenant remarked on her looks, suggesting she should lie down and rest again.

"You look fagged out, Miss Homfrey. More as if you need a good holiday instead of having just returned from one."

"It's nothing. I slept badly," the governess told her. "Yes, I'll rest to-day—this morning at least."

"Children, you must be as quiet as you can. Miss Homfrey is not to be disturbed," Kitty admonished.

The children, delighted at not having to begin lessons again yet, made themselves scarce very contentedly. They were in no want of playgrounds removed from the house, where there was no chance of Miss Homfrey being disturbed.

This thoughtfulness touched her, and had the thing not been of such vital importance to her lover, she might have changed her purpose. As it was, she but waited till her head had ceased its throbbing, and she felt able to talk business calmly. Then she sought her employer.

CHAPTER XX.

A Hundred Pounds Reward.

"Can I speak to you for a few minutes, Mr. Davenant?" and she appeared the cool, self-possessed young woman they usually saw.

"Certainly, Miss Homfrey. You are feeling better? I'm glad of that," and he moved forward a chair for her.

"I want your advice on a matter of importance—to myself, that is," she began.

Mr. Davenant looked surprised. "If I can be of any assistance ——" he began, doubtfully.

"You can. Indeed there is no one else I can appeal to."

"Will you tell me in what way I can serve you?" Steve asked, wondering whither this preamble was leading. He began to wish she had chosen his wife to consult with instead of himself. He was chary of being mixed up in the affairs of strange young women. "Don't you think it would be wiser to go to Mrs. Davenant instead of coming to me?" he suggested.

She shook her head. "Mrs. Davenant cannot help me in the way you can—if you will," she added.

He felt most uncomfortable, racking his brains to understand her drift. He conjectured it must have something to do with his brother, but what connection there was between Wilfred and the woman he could not imagine. Possibly Miss Homfrey regarded the attentions the man had paid her amounted to a proposal of marriage, and contemplated a breach of promise suit. Or they might have arranged to get married and demand an allowance from him, Stephen, to supply ways and means.

"It's a matter of ethics," she began.

"Great heavens! The girl's gone mad," Stephen thought, wondering if he had better call his wife. But she

looked so calm and self-possessed sitting there, that he waited for her to continue.

"If you were in desperate need of a sum of money—say a hundred pounds—Mr. Davenant, and saw a means of obtaining it in a perfectly lawful but not quite honorable way, what would you do?"

"Go without," he answered, decisively.

"But the person I speak of cannot do without it. He must have it," she insisted.

"She must mean Wilfred," he said to himself. Aloud he asked, "Who is the person you are speaking for, Miss Homfrey?"

"A friend of mine."

"Why does he not speak for himself?" then, as she hesitated, "May I ask his name?"

"It would serve no purpose to tell you his name. I represent him to you."

"Then tell him from me that money obtained in a dishonorable way can lead to no good. Is that all you wish to consult me about?"

"No. I am in desperate need of a hundred pounds to send my friend. As you advise me against obtaining it in the way I have named, will you lend it to me?"

"Lend it to you! Let you have a hundred pounds? Really, Miss Homfrey, you take my breath away."

"I don't ask it as a gift," she reminded him. "I ask for a loan."

"And the security?" he queried. He seemed amused.

"I have none," she confessed.

"Of course you haven't. Neither has your friend," he told her, sarcastically.

"You will be paid back, every penny," she urged.

"And the interest?"

"The interest also at current rates," she said, quoting Bob's letter.

Mr. Davenant laughed aloud. It was like Wilfred's cheek, he thought, to put the woman up to this. He was evidently mistaken in thinking his brother had reformed. He was at his old games again.

"No, Miss Homfrey! It can't be done," he told her, rising. "I'm vexed you should have been led into this. It doesn't redound to the credit of either of you." He evidently expected her to go, but she remained seated.

"Then you advise me to obtain the hundred pounds in the other way?" she asked. "I told you I am in desperate need of it."

"Assuredly not, my good woman. You said it would be dishonorable," he told her.

"But perfectly legal," she reminded him. "You could have saved me from taking the course I must now follow. I hoped you would do so. That is why I came to you first."

"Very thoughtful of you, I'm sure," he sneered.

"It is because I had no wish to make you and your family suffer, Mr. Davenant." She spoke calmly, though her rising color betrayed her agitation.

"So we—I and my family—are to suffer for you and your friend! What about Wilfred?—he is one of the family."

"He will suffer more than any of you," she answered, in a low tone.

She saw he was trying in vain to grasp her meaning. "Have you forgotten the hundred pounds reward offered for information of the whereabouts of a certain William Dawson, suspected of ——"

Stephen dropped into his chair again with an oath.

"Blackmail, by Heaven!" he muttered. "Blackmail! You!" and she saw fear take the place of anger in his face.

"No ——" she began, but he interrupted.

"You! The woman we've trusted to train our children —whom we've made almost one of the family, one of our-

selves. Pah! I couldn't have believed it if anyone else had told me."

"Please do not condemn me so severely, Mr. Davenant. I have no wish to levy blackmail. I came to you hoping, believing, that you would help me. It is you who force me to the only other course."

Stephen sat with his head buried in his hands. When he spoke it was in a smothered voice.

"You know I'm helpless. I must submit to being bled by you and—him," he said, bitterly.

"It is not a question of bleeding anyone," she protested. "I ask you for a loan of one hundred pounds—not very much to you—but vital to my friend."

"Bosh! How many more hundreds are to follow?"

"No more! I only ask for this one loan for a certain purpose."

"What purpose?" he demanded.

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"No, of course not. Your friend might object."

She did not reply. Stephen could still not see clearly how his brother came into the business unless ——

"Did Wilfred set you on to this, Miss Homfrey?" he demanded.

"Your brother? Certainly not. Mr. Wilfred would be the last person I'd care should know of it," she told him.

Stephen felt as if a weight were lifted from off him. His brother had not betrayed his trust after all.

"Yet if he did not tell you, how did you find out? You never saw the so-called Dawson," he said.

"I discovered your brother's identity accidentally. The burn on his arm was the first thing. I looked after that till it healed, you know."

"Playing the ministering angel game in order to betray him," Stephen exclaimed, bitterly.

"I shall be very grieved if you oblige me to do that," she said, carrying the war into the other's camp.

Mr. Davenant looked at the governess, in two minds what to make of her. Coming to him and demanding a hundred pounds at the point of a pistol, as it were, was so opposed to all his pre-conceived ideas of the stately, self-contained lady they had been living on familiar terms with all these months, that he felt knocked off his balance for the time being. Besides, there was that other matter of Wilfred's penchant for her. How was he to reconcile that belief with her present threat to betray his whereabouts to the police. Not that he could ever permit it to go that far. He must pay up, of course. There was no escape. But if she had cared for him ——

"Tell me," he began, and the bitterness was no longer in his tone. "Has there been anything between you and Wilfred—any understanding?"

"I don't think I follow you. In what way do you mean?"

"I mean has he made love to you—asked you to marry him?" Stephen explained.

"Made love to me? Your brother! Why, Mr. Davenant, your brother is over head and ears in love with Miss Fetherston!"

"With Joan! In love with Joan!" Mr. Davenant repeated. He was genuinely surprised, the governess saw, at her statement. "Are you certain of it?"

"Quite. I've known it for some time."

"He told you?"

"No—I found it out for myself."

"Accidentally again, I suppose," he suggested, grimly.

"I don't go about the world with my eyes shut," she informed him.

"So it seems." He heaved a sigh as he sat down to his writing table and took a cheque book from the drawer.

"To whom shall I make this payable?" he inquired, taking up a pen.

"To me, please."

He wrote it out and handed it to her. "Do you intend leaving us, Miss Homfrey?" he asked, as she thanked him.

"That depends on you, Mr. Davenant. I have no desire to give up my situation just yet."

"If Mrs. Davenant were to learn of this ——" he pointed to the cheque.

"Then I should have no option. I'm quite aware of that," she said, rising.

"I have never had any secrets from my wife," he told her.

"Then please don't let me be the cause of your having any, Mr. Davenant," and she moved towards the door.

"I should be sorry if you left us. You suit us, and the children are fond of you, though you keep them under control, too. Yes, we should both miss you, Miss Homfrey."

"Thank you."

"I think, after all, I need not tell Mrs. Davenant. It would only worry her for nothing. Yes, I think we'll just leave things as they are, Miss Homfrey."

"A clever woman," he mused, as she glided out of sight round the verandah, the cheque folded so as to be concealed in her palm. "A deuced clever woman! No, I don't think I shall tell Kitty. No need to bother her."

This last as a salve to his conscience, perhaps.

Then his thoughts turned to what the governess had told him of Wilfred. So it was Joan Fetherston he meant when he said that about a woman, and not Miss Homfrey at all. Poor Wilfred! Talk of hitching one's chariot to a star! As much chance for him with the owner of Windfells as with a princess of the blood. Besides, there was that fellow Rawlins always dangling round her. Not much show he'd give another man. No doubt it had been

fixed up between him and Miss Fetherstor long ago. And if so, nobody could call it an unsuitable union. He was well-born and well-favored. Brainy enough, too, and she had enough of this world's goods to keep them both in comfort. No, it would be by no means a bad bargain for Joan. But poor Wilfred! Stephen could not but feel sorry for his scape-grace brother, trying so hard to live down the past.

"The others won't be home to lunch," Kitty informed him a little later as they sat down to the mid-day meal. Miss Homfrey had driven into Colterton, and taken the children with her. "She was anxious to get to the bank before it closes," she added.

"She didn't ask Wilfred to drive her, I suppose?" her husband remarked, dryly.

"Not that I know of. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing."

And Wilfred, coming in the next minute, glanced round at the empty places, and his face fell.

On their return from the drive they found him waiting for them.

"I've been looking out for you all the afternoon," he told them, as the children, in a clamorous duet, poured forth a full account of all their doings in the town.

"And Miss Homfrey got us ice-creams, and Teddy couldn't eat more than one, cause they made his toof ache," shouted Tottie. "I ate free!"

"I haven't been able to get a word with you since you got home," the man said, speaking to the governess over the children's heads.

"But were you particularly anxious to?" she asked.

"Of course I was. I want to hear all that happened while you were away at Portland."

"You already know it. The children told you in their letters," she parried, teasingly.

"It was very good of them—of you, rather—to send me so many letters. But there must have been lots more that happened to you," he urged.

"Well, let me think. You know about Mr. Wells saving Jimmy McTravers from drowning?"

"Yes, I know about that."

"And how brave we all thought him for risking his life with his clothes on, and ——"

"Yes, yes. Nell told me all that."

"And what a hero we all thought him," she continued, taking an impish pleasure in withholding what he would give his ears to hear—mention of Joan Fetherston.

"Oh, yes, the children told me all about Wells." He was growing impatient. "Tell me about the others. What did they do?"

"Well, Mollie and Annie, and our children learnt to swim quite decently. Mr. Wells taught them."

"They told me," he interrupted.

"And we had water tournaments, as he called them."

"What did Kitty and Nell and—the rest do?"

"They bathed and went boating, and we had picnics and concerts, and dances."

"Who danced?"

"Well, Mr. Wells and Miss Fetherston, and your sister and several of the others who were staying there."

"They must have had a jolly time," he said, with a far-away look in his dark eyes.

And then Miss Homfrey relented.

"It was really too hot for dancing much," she told him. "Miss Fetherston spent most of the time with Miss Davenant and the children and me, on the beach. Teddy and Tottie are very fond of her, as you know, and she seemed to be quite happy with them."

"But Wells? I thought she liked talking to him when she was here," Wilfred ventured to remind her.

"Yes, she gets on with him all right. So does every girl who meets him. He has the gift of being popular."

"And she was present when he made that clever rescue?" he was constrained to ask.

"Yes, we were all there," she told him.

"What did she think of it?"

"The same as we all thought—the pluckiest thing we'd ever witnessed," she averred.

"He must have been pleased to appear a hero in her eyes," Wilfred suggested, enviously.

"He was the one to make the least of it, belittled it, in fact," the governess told him.

"Yes, a fellow would naturally hate to be fussed over," he assented.

"Still, when a man has done a courageous act—an out and out brave deed, such as risking his life to save another, whether it be from drowning or from a burning building" —she kept her eyes on his till his fluttered and fell—"he cannot escape being treated as a bit of a hero," she said. As he was silent she pressed him. "Don't you agree with me, Mr. Davenant?"

"I? Oh, I'm not in a position to give an opinion," he stammered.

"You have never saved a person's life, you mean?" she queried.

"I mean I haven't had Wells's luck," he replied.

"I believe you're just a little bit jealous of Bertie Wells," she suggested, laughing.

"I believe I am, Miss Homfrey, though not of his heroic fame."

"Then of what?" she asked him. "Surely not his personal appearance? He can't hold a candle to you in the way of looks, you know," she said, appraisingly.

"Of his good standing in the eyes of his fellows, his unsullied repute; of a past to which he can look back without a pang of remorse; of a fair future ahead."

The pain in his voice moved the girl. She strove to find some cheering words.

"Surely your future is still to be made," she reminded him. "The making of that, at least, is in your own hands, Mr. Davenant."

"It may be the case with some, but mine has been already made; and whatever I do I can never unmake it," he said. Then, as she still protested. "How could you realise what lies behind my present life?" he went on. "And I cannot tell you without forfeiting your good opinion, Miss Homfrey. And that I cannot bear to do. You have been one of the beacon lights to my path since I came here. Believe me, I can never thank you enough for all you have done for me."

"If he only knew!" she thought. And she felt thankful that Stephen Davenant had saved her from the necessity of treading the treacherous way.

CHAPTER XXI.

The New Manager.

"George, what do you think! Mr. Rawlins is leaving Windfells!"

Trot Wilcocks had just received the news in a note from Nell Davenant.

"I heard it was likely," her husband answered.

"And you never told me, George."

"I heard it confidentially. Miss Fetherston asked me to do what I could to find a good man for the position," he explained.

"But George, didn't you tell her you have a man, just the thing for her?"

"I haven't," he contradicted, in surprise.

"But what about Bertie?" she cried. "Why, it's just what I could have most wished to happen. He'll just love managing for Joan Fetherston."

"He'd have her in the Insolvency Court in less than twelve months," George Wilcocks said.

"I know you never have done Bertie justice, but you needn't stand in his light when a chance like this offers," Trot said.

"My dear, I've no wish to stand in anyone's light, but I'd no more think of allowing your cousin to make ducks and drakes of my friend's property than I'd fly." And be it remarked this was before the ubiquity of the aeroplane, so Mr. Wilcocks' statement meant more than it would to-day.

"You know I'd love it if he and Joan Fetherston would take a fancy to one another, and this would be such a chance of bringing them together, quite providential, I call it."

"Sorry, my dear girl, but I can't see it in your way," her husband told her. "Anyway, I wouldn't bother my head about Bertie. He'll fall on his feet, wherever he is. Pulling that young fool out of the water may have been the best day's work he ever did."

"It was a very brave act. Even you, though you do despise him, can't deny it."

"I don't despise him, my dear Trot. I told you he was only wasting his time up here. So he was, but it was as much your doing as any fault of his. You made him fetch and carry for you or take you and the children round visiting. It was very pleasant for him, no doubt, but it's not the way to learn station management. No, wait till he gets up with the McTravers family. It showed a nice sense of gratitude on the boy's part to get his people to send him that invitation."

"I hope they won't grow so fond of him that they won't let him come back to us," his wife said, alarmed at the thought.

"I just hope they will. Old McTravers has half a dozen unmarried daughters ——"

"Five," Trot corrected. "Jim told me."

"Well, five then. All older than Jim, mind, and all nearly six feet. Just picture it, my love. Can't you see little Bertie in the midst of them all, down on their knees, hero-worshipping? Great Scot, Trot! He'll have the time of his life up there. Want to come back to us? Not much.'

Which, to anticipate a little, was exactly what took place. The hospitable McTraverses could not make enough of the brave young man who had snatched their fondly-loved Jimmy from a watery grave. Old McTravers pressed him to make his home among them, offering him any one of his girls he choose to take, with a sixth share of the property after his own death.

"There's good stuff in any one of my girls," he told Bertie, regarding his nearly thirty feet of daughters with

a fond, parental eye. "Good stuff, as you'll find anywhere, Mr. Wells."

So Bertie, maintaining that one can't have too much of a good thing, took the tallest, who happened to be the second daughter, and never found cause to regret his choice.

It was on the advice of Tom Rawlins that Miss Fetherston wrote to her several friends in the district, begging for their help in finding a manager to take his place.

"You see, Miss Joan, by getting a man recommended by Mr. Wilcocks, or Mr. Davenant, or others about here, you insure their having your interests pretty prominently in sight always. They'll feel in a way responsible for things going on properly at Windfells, and you'll not be left to fight your own battles alone."

Joan heaved a sigh of regret as she recalled how faithfully Tom Rawlins had fought her battles for her in the past.

"I wish you were not going so far away," she told him. "I should like to feel you were within reach if ever I want your aid. But away in Queensland—it's like going to another country as far as this part of the world is concerned."

The note of regret in Joan's voice set Tom's pulse leaping.

"I'd throw up McIntosh's offer and stay on with you now, if you say the word, Joan."

The fate of both their lives hung in the balance, and they both knew and felt that the present moment was big with meaning. The girl was as one caught up on the crest of a wave, either to be carried within reach of the friendly life-line and safety, or swept out into an unknown sea to struggle alone against the dangers that beset her. Why should she not seek safety and happiness by choosing the former course, and taking the offer she read in

the man's declaration. She felt the call of her sex for the man's strong arm, for love and protection, and sheltering care.

She was about to yield—had already turned to tell him he had won, when Nell Davenant, with a basket of late plums in her hand, came round the garden path towards them.

"Have some," she invited, holding out her basket to Joan and her companion. "They're not bad. They were getting spoilt by the heat, so I thought I'd gather them."

Joan took one absently, and bit into it, but Rawlins gave no heed to Miss Davenant's words more than an angry frown at the interruption. As Nell passed on up the steps of the verandah and into the house, he sought to bring the situation back to the moment of her appearance. But the thread had been snapped. Joan's momentary weakness had passed, and she was once more the faithful friend of the other girl, incapable of robbing her of the man she loved.

. . . . . .

So the manager, to leave as little as possible to chance, instructed Miss Fetherston in the keeping of accounts, showed her how his books were all written up to date, made long lists of prices of stock and wool, taught her to distinguish the fleeces of merinoes, and comebacks, and crossbreds, giving her a rough idea of wool-classing, though she would have an expert at shearing time to do all this for her. He made out a wage list for her own private satisfaction.

"Shearers may demand more next season," he warned her, "so this list may not be of much use except for your income tax. There's a lot of work I'd like to have seen finished before I leave, but it's too late now. The next fellow will have to look after it. There's the new shearing shed—I've drawn a rough plan of my own ideas for it, and estimates of what material will be required, and the prices. I'll hand them over to my successor."

"You're very good to me, Tom, and I feel I can never be sufficiently grateful," Joan acknowledged. They were seated in the manager's office, the table scattered with account books, ledgers and other documents. "I'm quite sure that I'll never be able to grasp all these complicated figures, though; I never was good at sums, even at school."

"I think you should make an effort to understand the making and spending of your own income," he urged. "You don't know what sort of a man you may get next."

"But, if I only take someone recommended by my friends, surely he won't be likely to rob me?" she exclaimed.

"Not wilfully, perhaps," he admitted, "but a careless keeping of accounts may lead to unseen leakages."

"Which I certainly would not discover," she laughed.

"Nevertheless, Miss Joan, I still urge you to keep things in your own hands as far as possible."

A piece of advice Tom Rawlins felt no reason to retract when, a short time later, he learned who the new manager was to be.

CHAPTER XXII.

On Stephen's Recommendation.

Among other letters in his mail Mr. Davenant received a short note from Miss Fetherston, asking him to interest himself in procuring a suitable manager to take the place of Mr. Rawlins, who was leaving for Queensland as soon as she could replace him. This letter Stephen left till last, as it could wait till he had answered the more important ones.

He felt some surprise that she should permit Rawlins to leave her, for, like many others, he had been prepared to hear of an engagement between the two. It appeared a suitable arrangement in every way. Besides, station managers to equal Rawlins were not as plentiful as blackberries, he knew. While he considered the question, Miss Homfrey's words recurred to his mind. If it were true, as she stated, that his brother was over head and ears in love with Joan, how would it be if he, Stephen, were to give a helping hand to Providence, or Fate, or Destiny, or whatever else governs our poor little human life, and bring these two unsuspecting persons together? If ill should come from his meddling would he, Stephen, sleep ill o' nights in consequence? But why should aught but good result?

Wilfred had proved himself sufficiently capable and—apparently—trustworthy, to fill such a position, if he would. Stephen had his doubts about Wilfred's acceptance. He sent for his brother.

"A note from Miss Fetherston," he said, handing it to the other. "I'd like you to see what she says."

The man took it, letting his eyes rest on the writing, but all he took in was the signature, Joan's name written in a bold, characteristic single sweep of the pen, held him tongue-tied and blind to everything else. He had never seen her writing, never held a letter of hers in his hand

before. He felt he wanted to go on holding it, to keep it secreted away with those other stolen mementoes of the girl, whence he could take it in solitude and devour it again and again, when there was nobody to observe him. He sat so long gazing at the name at the bottom of the sheet without speaking, that his brother, growing impatient, broke in:

"You see what she says?"

"No—I haven't read it," and turning to the beginning he read it through. "Rawlins leaving her! How can he!" The exclamation burst from him without thought. He would have recalled it.

"He wishes to better himself, it seems," his brother explained. "I confess it surprised me, too."

"I thought—I always fancied that Rawlins and Miss Fetherston would ——" he paused.

"Would end by forming a partnership for life," finished Stephen. "So did I, if the truth must be told, and I think a great many more were of the same opinion, but evidently it's not the case."

"No—I suppose not." Wilfred spoke slowly, as if it took him time to readjust his mind to the fact.

"It's a pity," he said, after a pause.

"What! that they haven't taken a fancy to marry one another?" Mr. Davenant wondered just what his brother's opinion might be.

"That he's going away and leaving Windfells," Wilfred said. "Will you be able to help her in finding someone suitable?" he asked Stephen.

"I think so. I have someone in my eye now."

"I'm glad of that. A girl's so helpless with no man of her own family to advise her," Wilfred said.

"Can you guess whom I have thought of?" his brother asked.

"Do I know him?" Wilfred looked up from the letter, which he still held.

"I'm going to suggest you, Wilfred."

"Me! Impossible, Steve! Why, think! Oh, no, I couldn't. I'm the last person who ought to think of showing up at Windfells after—after—what happened," and the man's features worked with the pain of remembrance.

"I'm going to recommend you," repeated his brother, "because I know of no man I can so honestly say I consider fit for the position." Then, as the other still persisted in the impossibility of his ever consenting to such a thing: "It's not that I'm anxious to shunt you off from here. I'll be genuinely sorry to lose you. In fact I don't quite see how I shall get along without you," he said.

"Then let me stay," the other begged.

"Tell me honestly, Wilfred. Suppose all that's past had never taken place, or that it had happened elsewhere, would you be afraid to take this in that case?"

"Perhaps not, but I can't get away from it. It's like a mill-stone hung round one's neck. It'll drag me down always."

Wilfred still retained Joan's letter between his fingers. He wanted to ask Steve to let him keep it, but feared betraying himself.

"Don't you want to go to Windfells? I mean, is it that you do not wish to re-visit the place—to come into close contact with Miss Fetherston again?"

Wilfred was silent. His brother's words raised such a longing within him that he could not trust himself to reply. His voice might give him away. He wanted to go, oh! how much he wanted to take this chance, thrown by Fate at his feet, of seeing her daily, of serving her, worshipping at her shrine near at hand, instead of afar.

And yet—he was afraid. He was like the child putting forth a hand to grasp the glittering rainbow hued bubble, knowing that it will burst at a touch. Only Wilfred's bubble was one whose bursting might mean death, or something akin to physical death. Here at Bunglatta he was safe from discovery. Elsewhere, who could foresee what

dangers lay in wait? At Windfells, more than at any other place, fear of recognition must be his close companion, stalking menacingly at his side.

"Sleep on it," suggested Stephen, seeing his brother was torn two ways over the matter. "Don't be in a hurry to decide now."

And so it was settled. In the end, Stephen Davenant decided for his brother, who left the question entirely in his hands.

Kitty was critical. "You say he has been a help to you here, and yet, at the first chance, you want to get rid of him. Why?" she asked.

"Well, it's a better position for him, my dear," her husband argued.

"For him, perhaps, but what about Joan's interests? Is he capable of taking charge of a place? I don't mean can he be trusted, because I know you wouldn't have done it, if you had thought otherwise. But has he had enough experience?"

"He is as capable of looking after Windfells as I should be. With a little more experience—say a year at the game—he'll be as good as, if not better than, Rawlins. Already in his handling of the men, he can run rings round us both," Stephen told her.

"I don't think he ought to leave us if he's all you make out," Kitty maintained. "Look how good you have been to him. Where would he have been if you had turned him away that night?"

Her husband had a fairly good idea of where his brother would have found himself had he been refused a hiding-place at Bunglatta, but he did not enlighten his wife in the matter. All he said was:

"It's through me he's taking the place. I'm putting on flesh too quickly ever since he's been doing my share of the work. It won't hurt me to buckle to and look after things myself for a bit."

. . . . . .

It was about this time that a paragraph in a local paper attracted Mr. Davenant's notice. It was of small importance in its way, and in a city newspaper would have been relegated to an obscure corner. But in the *Colterton News* it was stretched to its utmost length, written up with fullest details, and surmises where facts were not forthcoming, and the whole headed with large type.

"Did you see this?" Stephen asked, handing his brother the newspaper. "It ought to be a bit of a help to you."

Wilfred read it through in silence.

It was an account of the result of recent bush fires which had raged throughout a particular district during the past two months. Part of the Grampians had been swept almost bare, and the vegetation destroyed. On the slopes of the range, gullies and ravines, long concealed from the eye of man, were laid bare. A stockman, out after stray cattle, had come across human remains among the rocks and boulders so exposed—some poor wretch, either overtaken by the flames and unable to escape, or else dead before the fire reached the spot. The body was unrecognisable, but the charred remnants of blanket near the spot and an old rusted billy, pointed to the man having been either a swagman or a tramp in search of a job. As the police had no record of anyone in that part being missing, it was thought that the remains might be those of a shearer, William Dawson, who had mysteriously disappeared some months ago, and for whom a warrant was still out on the charge of incendiarism. Unfortunately, all identification marks had been obliterated. Examination of the remains proved nothing. Tattoo marks on the left arm, by which the police hoped to identify Dawson, if they ever found him, could no longer be traced. If the surmise were correct, and Dawson had indeed met his death in such an awful fashion (the paragraph continued) it appeared to be a just retribution for his many crimes, and the public could not but feel relieved that the miscreant was beyond the power of doing further harm.

With face pale and drawn, and a hand that shook, Wilfred laid down the paper.

"They think it a good thing I should be dead like—like that poor wretch," he groaned, hiding his bent head on his arms, folded on the table.

Stephen was nonplussed for the moment. He had not expected his brother to take it like that. He thought only of the probable cessation of vigilance on the part of the police. If William Dawson were officially defunct, Wilfred Davenant was henceforth a free man—free to walk the earth without fear of recognition from his old-time mates. Like the phoenix rising from its ashes, so might he rise a new being.

But Wilfred's thoughts flew to Joan, and how she would regard the paragraph he had just read.

She would be glad—thankful, as the newspaper said—that this man was no more—could work her no further evil. And he, Wilfred, would be compelled to listen to her saying it, all unconscious as she would be of the identity of the man she had engaged as her new manager.

Could he make up his mind to go through with it? But for Stephen, who would not hear of his withdrawing now that he had consented to become an applicant for the position, Wilfred would certainly have refused to go through with it.

Stephen, however, was firm. "Buck up, man! Why, you haven't the pluck of a mouse. Forget you ever heard of Bill Dawson. He's dead and buried. You're alive and good for many years of usefulness. Take the goods the gods provide, and be thankful. If you don't give yourself away, there's nobody now to do it." While he spoke, Stephen wondered how the paragraph would strike Miss Homfrey. He felt no doubt of her silence now.

At Windfells they also saw the paragraph in the paper and remarked upon it.

"Poor man! What an awful death," Joan said, compassionately.

"An awful death, but whoever it may be, it's not Dawson," was Tom Rawlins' comment.

"Why do you think that?" asked Nell.

"Dawson had neither billy nor blanket with him when he left here. He took nothing, not even the horse he came on. It's running here yet, waiting for an owner to turn up. It's not likely it belonged to Dawson—more likely he borrowed it—French leave, I dare say."

CHAPTER XXIII.

Back at Windfells.

There was grief at Bunglatta the day Uncle Wilfred left to go to his new position at Windfells.

After a prolonged parting which, in spite of his best endeavors, he could not feel was in any way cheerful, he rode away, a valise supplied by Stephen containing his clothes. He had no other possessions. From time to time, along the straight stretch of red gravelled roadway, he turned in the saddle to waive many last farewells to two little figures at the gate. For the remainder of that day, Teddy and Tottie were naughtier than they had ever been before. Miss Homfrey, sympathising with their trouble, was very patient, but when Teddy kicked his mother because she would not do what he asked, it was time to interfere, and both children were sentenced to go to bed without their tea. Tottie cried herself to sleep. Teddy scorned tears as babyish, and fought hard to keep back the sobs that would rise in his poor little, shaken body. He didn't mind being sent to bed so much. There was nothing to stay up for now Uncle Wilfred had gone away for ever and ever. But he was afraid Miss Homfrey intended to supplement his punishment by giving him ever so many verses of "How we beat the Favorite" to learn for to-morrow. So, when the governess came in to him later to tuck in the sheet and draw the mosquito curtain, Teddy pretended to be asleep, and squeezed his eyes very tight shut.

Dropping on her knees beside the cot, she whispered in his ear, "Never mind, Teddy boy. We'll ask Daddy to let us drive over to Windfells some day to see Uncle Wilfred. I know Miss Fetherston will have us."

Two hot little arms were flung round her neck, and the long pent tears burst forth, easing the childish sorrow. She smoothed the curls back from the flushed face with a

soft, regular stroking of her hand, till she coaxed him off to sleep.

"Poor little chap," she said, softly, as she extinguished the light, for the governess also felt the gap caused by Wilfred Davenant's departure.

"Would you care to go for a ride this afternoon and give the dogs a run?" Joan asked her friend. "We may meet your brother," she added.

Nell was quite agreeable, so Fergus, the groom, was told to bring two horses round to the house. Sultan for Miss Fetherston, and another which she mentioned, for her friend.

When they were about to mount, Joan asked the groom why he had brought a strange horse instead of the one she ordered for Miss Davenant.

"The other's 'urt 'is lyg," Fergus explained. "'E's gawn lime, so I fetched this 'er moke. 'E's an orl right 'orse ter ride if the lydy don't mind."

Nell, who was at home in the saddle, said she didn't mind as long as he could go.

"Oh! 'e'll go orl right. 'E ain't a bad bit of 'orse flesh. Belonged to one of the shearers an' wuz lef' 'ere to be climed. No one's climed 'im as yet."

"Is that the animal they say belonged to Dawson?" Joan inquired, eyeing the horse with disfavor.

"It's the one 'e lef' be'ind 'im, Miss. Mr. Rawlins don't think as 'ow it ever rightly belonged to 'im, though," Fergus answered.

"What's his name?" Nell asked, preparing to mount.

"Dunno as 'e's got any nime, Miss. The chaps 'ere call 'im 'Soap.'"

"'Soap!' What an extraordinary name!" the girl said.

"'It were old Jacob as christened 'im. Bit of a wag old Jacob. Some of the chaps started callin' 'im Dawson, but 'e never knowed 'isself by that there nime. Then one dy Jacob wuz goin' to wash 'is 'ands an' one of the chaps

'ad took 'is soap awy, an' old Jacob sings out 'Soap!' An' this old 'orse comes beltin' over to 'im an' Jacob 'e swears it must be the 'orse's nime. So ever since that 'e's bin called 'Soap.' It's an orl right nime for Dawson's 'orse, too. Soap's clean an' slippy, an' 'e done a clean slip awy from the police that night arter 'e been an' burnt the shed you remember, Miss. Leastways, we all thought 'e done, but I see in the piper they been an' found 'im burnt to a cinder up Grampians wy."

"Mr. Rawlins thinks it was not Dawson they found," Joan told him. "The man they discovered there had a billy and blanket, and Dawson had neither, or rather he left his behind him here."

"Lor' bless you, Miss, 'e'd not be stuck for things 'e wanted in that wy. Get 'em as 'e went along, 'e would. It's 'im orl right. Wy, if it ain't 'im, w'ere's 'e got to?"

As neither of the girls could answer this question, Fergus's statement was not contradicted.

Both Nell and Joan rode side-saddle. They were born before the later and more reasonable style became fashionable. Both were good horsewomen, and as the day was perfect, a light breeze tempering the heat of the afternoon sun, they enjoyed the exercise. The dust lying thick on the road did not trouble them, though the dryness of the land and the sight of half-starved animals on some of the farms was a serious calamity in the eyes of both, whose whole fortunes were bound up in the uncertain returns from landed property.

"I wonder how your brother will like being here?" Joan remarked.

"It's less a question of what Wilfred likes than if he is fit for such a responsible position," Nell told her. "I'm rather wishing you were having someone else—a stranger," she added.

Joan did not answer. She also had her doubts.

"Why did you decide on Wilfred? I know Mr. Rawlins doesn't approve," her friend said.

"Mr. Davenant recommended him to me. He thinks I cannot get anyone better, if as good."

"I know Stephen thinks a lot of him. He's so good with the men. I wonder he agreed to spare him to you."

"I think it was very good of him. But I think, Nell, the real reason I am having him is because he's your brother. I shall feel it is a link with you and the Bunglatta folk. I have been dreading Tom Rawlins going away, because I know I'll feel so lonely."

"Poor girl! I never thought of it in that way, but, of course, with Wilfred at Windfells it will be a link between us."

A cloud of dust ahead heralded a horseman, whose nearer approach revealed Wilfred himself.

He was out of the saddle in an instant, greeting them, Joan's hand in his.

"This is kind of you both, though I can't flatter myself you are riding this way on my account," he exclaimed, pleasantly, and Nell told herself she would hardly have recognised this upright, clean limbed young man, wiry and tanned though he was from work and sun, for the same bent-shouldered derelict who had appeared among them at Bunglatta only such a short time back as the Spring of last year.

"Indeed we are," Joan smiled a delightful welcoming smile—for was not this Nell's brother, and he saw through her veil the red of her parted lips, and caught the flash of her white teeth.

Nell's horse, whinnying a welcome (perhaps to the animal Wilfred still held by the bridle, or to Wilfred himself) began nuzzling its nose in the man's coat pocket. The girl, tightening her rein, pulled its head round, but it returned to its investigation as soon as she slackened it.

"Soap's trying to steal something from your pocket, Wilfred," she told him.

Dropping Joan's hand he turned.

"Nothing there, old boy," he said, laying his hand caressingly on the horse's sleek neck. "How are you, Nell?"

She lent and kissed him on the cheek. They had not met since she left for Portland.

"I see you're riding Fairy-lore," she observed.

"You don't mind?" he asked.

"Not at all. It will do her good, she gets too soft if she doesn't have exercise."

"I was afraid she was hardly up to my weight, but Stephen says she won't feel it for this distance. Still—how would it be if you let me change the saddles?"

She agreed, and the change was effected, Nell riding back on her own mare and her brother on the shearer's horse, Soap, as he was called.

It was a ride Wilfred never forgot—the first taste of the new life opening to him—the girls, one on each side, entertaining him with gay chatter of which he took in little more than half, so engrossed were his thoughts trying to realise the present. That he, the down and discredited, should have so far retrieved his life as to have become the man Joan Fetherston was ready to place in a position of trust! Danger had withdrawn to the background of his vision, though he must still walk warily. But for the moment he felt perfectly safe here with these two women, the dearest two in the world for him. Absorbed in the glamor of the present content, he let his horse keep its own pace, riding with loose rein, listening to the talk of his companions, when his animal stumbled.

"Whoa! Aesop!" he exclaimed.

"His name is Soap!" Nell reminded him.

"I'm sorry—I must try and remember," he hastened to cover the first slip he had made so far. It was not serious, but it tended to warn him that he must be careful.

They passed by the ruins of the old wool-shed on their way to the homestead. Joan mentioned the burning.

"The man who did it will never answer for it now," she told him.

"A good thing, don't you think so?" and his voice was as casual as that of one outside the subject of discussion.

"I'm sorry he should die like that," she said.

"He was an incendiary and deserved his fate." Nell was a believer in poetical justice. "And he all but succeeded in murdering you," she continued. "If it hadn't been for Perry, you'd have been burnt to death. You have said so to me."

"Yes," Joan agreed, slowly. "All the same, I wish poor Dawson could have lived to mend his ways. To die so horribly ——" she shuddered, "and so soon after ——"

"You would have wished him time to repent, Miss Fetherston?" Wilfred put in, earnestly.

"Wouldn't you?" she queried.

"Yes. I would give all such sinners a chance to retrieve their past lives. Who knows what little thing might turn a man's life from evil?"

Nell did not look at her brother, though she felt he was thinking of his own life, his own past. Thank heaven! she thought, he can have nothing on his soul such as Dawson was accused of.

Joan introduced the new manager to Mrs. Robson, who, though inclined to look on him as an interloper—she did not hide her disapproval of Rawlins' departure—came in time to like Wilfred for his own sake.

Tom Rawlins, who had remained on to put the newcomer into the ways of the place, never took to Wilfred Davenant. His first impression of the man wore off somewhat during their daily intercourse, but beneath, indescribable, but subtly manifest, was a something Rawlins could not explain.

"I'm certain I've never met the man in my life, yet he seems familiar to me," Tom told Miss Fetherston, in a private talk they had after the new manager's arrival.

"I have felt that, too," Joan confessed. "I asked him if we had ever met before—I seemed to have heard a voice like his."

"And he said 'No'?" Tom asked.

"He said he had never spoken to me before I met him at Bunglatta."

"Of course he may resemble dozens of other people, but he gives me the impression of knowing all about the place before I tell him. It's uncanny sometimes—unless he has been here before," he said.

"He has never been to Windfells that I know of," the girl answered. "While I was away at school he may have stayed with my father, but Aunt Lavinia has never met him before."

"It's strange," he mused. "One thing I must admit, Miss Joan," he went on. "I was prepared to advise you against letting him take my place here. I went by what I had heard only, and that was not in Davenant's favor. However, now I've seen the man, I must confess I think much better of him."

"I'm glad of that," the girl said. "Of course, I don't think Mr. Davenant would have urged my engaging his brother, unless he had been satisfied. But I shall feel much happier after what you have told me."

"And keep things in your own hands as much as possible, Miss Joan—not that I advise you to distrust him, but for your own satisfaction."

"Have you been speaking to him about it?" she asked.

"No—not particularly—why?"

"Because Wilfred Davenant begged me to do the same thing," she told him.

The day drew near when Rawlins was to leave. He had been closetted with Wilfred in his office most of these last weeks, putting him into possession of his plans for the improvement of the property. There was the new wool shed to be built before next shearing. Rawlins was

astonished at the new manager's grasp of the subject. Tom produced his own plan for the building, which Wilfred altered and bettered, suggesting an extension here, an addition there, and in every instance Tom admitted it was an improvement on his original proposal.

"We'll bring this wall further out. The old building was cramped," Wilfred said.

"Who told you so?" the other asked. He could not deny it.

"The men say it was," he answered. "And the woolpress was in an awkward place," Davenant proceeded, pencilling in a new place on the chart before him. "Did the men say that, too?" Tom asked.

"Er—yes. Stanton told me." Stanton was the woolpresser. "The drafting yards I'd bring closer in here," and he drew the line indicated.

It was the same with other things; Rawlins found Wilfred Davenant had little to learn from him.

"Whatever the fellow's experience has been, and wherever he gained his knowledge, it's thorough," Tom reflected.

It was the same when he came to the men employed on the place and their pay. He knew them all beforehand—or had very quickly acquired his knowledge, also their rate of wages.

"You seem to have pumped the men pretty freely," Tom grumbled. "I can't tell you anything."

"That's what I'm here for. I want to know everything at first hand," Wilfred said.

"I've made a note of the shearers' list for last year." Tom told him. "Those with a cross against the name I'd mark out—if they should apply to you next season."

Wilfred took the list. There was a cross against Dawson's name. Rawlins pointed to it.

"That's the chap supposed to have burnt down the shed," he told him.

"Supposed? I thought ——" he began.

"Well, it was never proved."

"And never will be now. He's passed in his checks," Wilfred reminded him.

"Not he. Dawson wasn't born to end his days that way. We'll hear of him again, or I'm very much mistaken," Rawlins asserted.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Golden Months.

Tom Rawlins had gone and Nell Davenant had said farewell with no more apparent regret than Miss Fetherston, though she felt the world very desolate after his departure. These last days at Windfells had been made happy by the presence of the man she loved, though he knew nothing of it.

Rawlins promised to write and let Joan know of his prospects, and the letters, when they came, she sent on to her friend, who treasured them in secret in a little locked desk.

Miss Homfrey did not forget her promise to Teddy, and the three arrived one day, to be received with a warm welcome by the owner of Windfells, and a no less hearty one by its manager. The noise and din which Teddy and Tottie and Wilfred, ably seconded by Joan, contrived to make the two days the visit lasted, nearly drove poor Mrs. Robson distracted. She confided to the governess her sympathy with her for having such boisterous young people to deal with. Miss Homfrey smiled lazily, declaring they were beyond her control, and left them to run wild as they listed. She knew a word from her would have restored order, but, being wise in her generation, refrained from speaking it. Children, like all young things, need an outlet for their spirits. At home her duty lay in repressing such spirits—parents expected it. Here she had no parents to please. So, while Joan and the little Davenants, with Uncle Wilfred's help, turned the place into a bear-garden with their rompings and games, Miss Homfrey took refuge with a book and lost herself in its pages.

"I have an excellent edition of Gordon's poems if you would care to read it," Aunt Lavinia informed her.

"Thanks, no," she drawled. "I never read Gordon."

"What! I thought you were such an admirer of his.' Mrs. Robson felt rebuffed.

"Well—when one knows a book by heart, it is waste of time to read it—don't you think?"

"It depends on the book," Mrs. Robson told her.

"But when you know the contents of any book, can you still take pleasure in reading it?" the governess asked.

"I know my Bible, Miss Homfrey, but I still read it," the old lady announced, sententiously. The slow, drawling tones, and what she expressed as "superior manner" of the governess irritated her.

"I shouldn't think of comparing them," the girl said.

"Of course not. You are inculcating a love for Gordon's works in your young pupils, I believe?"

"They have learnt a good many by heart," she told her.

"I should much like to hear Teddy and Tottie recite something. Will they, do you think?"

"Certainly not. I never allow them to recite to anyone but their parents."

"But is not that rather—rather cruel, Miss Homfrey?" the other said, disapprovingly.

"To the parents? Perhaps it is," the governess answered.

"I don't know that I altogether like her," Aunt Lavinia said afterwards, when discussing her with Joan. "She doesn't strike me as being quite—quite, well quite a lady."

"I didn't care for her at first," Joan admitted, "but Wilfred—Mr. Davenant I mean—speaks so gratefully of her kindness to him, that she must be a nice girl," Joan had learnt to think of the children's "Uncle Wilfred" by his Christian name, and it slipped from her lips unwittingly. Her aunt evinced surprise.

"My dear, surely you are not on sufficiently familiar terms to speak of him as 'Wilfred,'" she said, reprovingly.

Joan agreed she was not—it was a mistake, she admitted, but she felt angry that her cheeks grew hot for no reason at all. Turning towards the window to conceal her heightened color from the sharp eyes of Aunt Lavinia, "It's hearing the children speak of him so made me do it without thinking," she said.

"Because when I was young, my dear, it was not considered the right thing for any young girl to address a man by his Christian name, unless she were related to him or—I was going to say engaged to him, then of course ——. By the way, do you think he can be engaged to that extraordinary Miss Homfrey?"

"Why?" Joan asked quickly, a sudden dislike for the governess taking possession of her.

"They have been thrown together so much, and there's such a lot in propinquity. Besides, it would be quite a suitable match—for both of them," she concluded.

"Why?" the girl repeated. She remembered how short a time since she would have argued in the same way.

"Because, my dear, a man like young Mr. Davenant, with a past that one does not care to talk about, could not expect a nice girl—really nice, you understand—to run the risk of marriage with him."

"So you think Miss Homfrey should sacrifice herself?" Joan asked.

"Miss Homfrey, my dear, is a young woman thoroughly capable of looking after herself," Mrs. Robson announced.

This conversation took place before Wilfred had been at Windfells sufficiently long to win Aunt Lavinia's good opinion. It rankled in her niece's mind for a long time. In all her talks with the manager, in all their daily intercourse, the shadow cast by her aunt's words came between them. Louise Homfrey's hand stretched out to warn her off.

As the days passed, however, this shadow grew fainter, till the girl, in time, thrust it from her thoughts. Her aunt was mistaken in surmising there was anything between Wilfred and the governess, she told herself, and

believed it because she wished to think it true. She even led him on to talk of his life at Bunglatta, in which, it seemed, Miss Homfrey played a leading part.

"I wonder you could tear yourself away from Bunglatta," she said to him one day, "when you were so happy there."

He looked up in surprise. He had never heard her speak in quite such a sharp tone since he came.

"Steve made me come here, you know," he said..

"I wonder Miss Homfrey let you come," she persisted. "She must miss you so much."

"Why should you think that?"

"Well, don't you miss her?" she questioned.

"I miss all the Bunglatta folk. I was wonderfully happy there—happier than I ever thought to be," he told her.

"Yet you're not sorry you left, you do not regret the change?" She was determined to reach his inmost soul.

"Regret?" he laughed. "I could not be so wanting in ——" he looked at her, "gratitude," he substituted for the word that trembled on his lips.

"And you are happy here—content to stay on at Windfells?" she persisted.

The look he gave her was answer enough, without his feelingly uttered, "I'll stay, Miss Joan, till you yourself bid me leave you."

Neither of the two as yet saw the cloud gathering in the distance. Both were young, living only in the present. For the man, the daily sight and companionship of the woman he worshipped was a supreme joy. The girl, on her side, felt the spell of his presence grow stronger daily. She scarcely yet ventured to acknowledge the new influence that was threatening to overwhelm her, governing her, mastering her, enveloping her life in its folds. She began to look back on her past years as trivial, empty, and void. Her real life—the life that counted—began when she first met Wilfred Davenant, or if not then, from the moment

she first realised in him the man who was able to open for her the door of love's magic chamber. She sought his company for the joy it brought her, while she fled from it, fearful of betraying her secret. She was sweet and gentle one moment, harsh and cold the next, and the man would search his memory vainly for the cause he had given of offence. Haughty as a queen to her most humble slave, while he was with her, sending him from her to brood alone on her displeasure with him, and suffer pangs of remorse for his shortcomings, even though he knew not what they might be. She herself would also seek solitude in which to hug her great joy in secret, to take it furtively from its hiding place in her heart. She hardly dared as yet examine it fully—such a delicate, frail, beautiful flower that rough handling might crush and wither!

She was in no haste to hear him tell her what she could not but read in his eyes. And he worshipped always, putting a strong curb on his tongue to bind it to silence.

. . . . . .

So the months—golden months to two of the persons concerned—sped on. Summer had melted into Autumn, with its mildly cooler evenings and almost perfect days. Before Winter had laid its touch on the land in devastating frosts, the drought broke up. The parched earth put on its dress of emerald. Floods threatened even greater damage and loss than that caused by the drought. Pathetic paragraphs and letters appeared in the daily papers, detailing losses on the land.

"The farmers are always grumbling at something," quoth the smug town-dwellers, who suffer neither flood nor drought in their comfortably ordered lives.

The new shearing shed at Windfells advanced towards completion, and Wilfred saw it with satisfaction, embodying as it did his own ideas of what was best both for shearers and sheep, not to mention convenience in working arrangements for others engaged in the handling of wool and bales.

"It's to be hoped this one won't get burnt down," one

of the men observed. "You ain't likely to see Bill Dawson back next shearin', boss."

Wilfred thought not. He had almost forgotten such a person during these months of hard work.

Stephen came over on a two days' visit and congratulated him on his success.

"I think we may consider the past buried," he told him when, the ladies having retired, the brothers sat smoking over the fire.

"I am forgetting it at any rate, Steve. It no longer haunts me like a nightmare. At first I found it difficult to guard against letting out something that might lead to them suspecting. Had they been on the watch for me I should have been in the hands of the police long ago. But they have taken me on your guarantee, and no questions asked. I have a deal to thank you for, Steve."

He looked forward to a satisfactory shearing. So far no trouble with the Union, other than the annual demand for more wages and better conditions, had loomed on the horizon. The men he intended engaging were strangers to the place. Last year's shearers' applications received scant courtesy. He turned them down without exception.

Joan questioned his action. "Perry, at least, has nothing against him," she asserted, quoting Rawlins' opinion in his favor.

Wilfred produced the former manager's black list and showed Perry's name. He did not tell her the cross against Perry's name had been placed there by himself, and Joan did not suspect it.

"I'm sorry," she said, presently. "I can never forget I owe my life to Perry. It seems ungrateful to refuse him work here."

"Perry will find plenty of work elsewhere," he told her.

"But they say hand shearing is not so readily obtained now, so many sheds are going in for machines," she reminded him.

"I hope we'll be able to have machines at Windfells next year," he suggested.

"If you think it advisable," she agreed.

"I do," he replied. "They give much better results, are more economical, quicker—pay better than the old way."

He hoped she would not return to the former subject, but she was not to be side-tracked.

"I want you, particularly, not to turn Perry down this season, Mr. Davenant," she urged.

"I'm afraid you're too late, Miss Joan; I've already done so."

"I expected you to consult me about a thing of that sort," she spoke, with displeasure.

"I'm sorry—I didn't know you had any interest one way or the other about whom I engaged," he said, excusing himself.

"I haven't in the other cases, but I do wish you to engage Perry. Refuse all the rest if you like. I don't ask you to take Hansen."

"Hansen didn't apply," he interrupted.

"They say he's half crazy," she told him.

"So I believe."

"You know that? You seem to be very well informed of all that occurred here last year, Mr. Davenant."

He wondered what her words imported. Did she suspect anything, he asked himself.

"Rawlins and—and others have told me a good deal," he began, lamely.

"And you have imagined the rest for yourself," she took him up quickly.

"Perhaps I have gathered it from what you have been kind enough to teach me," he said, so humbly, that she was disarmed. But she was determined to have her way about Perry.

"You will write to Perry, please," she spoke more gently now, "and say you'll engage him, Mr. Davenant."

"I think not. In fact, I've already arranged for a full board."

She grew impatient at his continued refusal.

"If you don't write, I shall do so," she announced. "You have his address?"

He took a letter from a file on the desk. "I have Perry's address here, but ——"

"Give it to me, please!" She held out her hand.

Deliberately he tore it into small pieces and threw them into the basket at the side of the desk.

"Why do you do that?" Joan flushed with angry surprise.

"I don't wish you to write to the man. I don't want him here, Miss Fetherston."

"It almost looks as if you are afraid of him," she said, as she turned and walked out of the office without another word.

Afraid! If she only knew how he feared Perry and the others who knew him so well. Thank heaven, so far he had not been seen by any of his old mates, but he had offended Miss Fetherston, perhaps beyond forgiveness, by refusing to have the man back.

For days afterwards Joan kept him at a distance, vouchsafing only cold responses to his humble attempts at reconciliation. She loved to feel her power, to make her subject sue for pardon before being received back into her good graces. She saw he was suffering, but would not make up her mind to relent—yet. Then, in quite a simple way it came about that he was once more received into his lady's favor. Sultan, Joan's favorite riding-horse, became lame, the result of bad shoeing, Wilfred pronounced. He took off the shoe that caused the trouble and, after treating the injured foot, re-shod the animal himself.

"I learnt blacksmithing over in the West," he told her, when she expressed her thanks for the animal's relief from pain. "Worked at it for a couple of years. I've found it come in useful since."

"I wonder if there's any occupation you haven't tried your hand at, Mr. Davenant?" she said to him. "Why don't you write an account of your life? You must have had many adventures that would be interesting for your friends to read about."

He did not answer. There were pages in his past to which he could not look back, except to wish them expunged from his memory.

"You'll tell me of your life some time, Mr. Davenant? The years you passed away from home, I mean?" she asked.

"You would not care to hear of wasted years, Miss Joan," he said, and she was moved to a great pity for the man who had gone down into the depths and who was now making such a brave fight—and so well succeeding.

"Are you so certain those years you speak of were what we mean by 'wasted'?" she asked him.

He looked at her in doubt. He never felt sure how much she might have guessed of his past. He could not venture to betray himself yet, even to her. He knew the time would come some day, perhaps soon, when he must announce, "I am that Bill Dawson whom you loathe and fear, who is even now being hunted as a criminal, who has lived in your house, eaten at your table, held your hand in his and—greatest crime of all—who has dared to love you."

"I mean," Joan said, "such an acquirement as being able to cure Sultan's lameness. Had you not learnt to shoe horses during those years you describe as 'wasted,' my poor old gee might still be suffering," and she smiled so adorably that it was only by a strong effort of will he refrained from telling her there and then, that, if the whole remainder of his life might be passed in serving her, he should deem himself amply compensated for the trials of the past.

CHAPTER XXV.

Hansen's Reappearance.

It was late September. Shearing was to start the following week. Wilfred was busy from morning till late afternoon, generally returning to the house after sunset. Sometimes dusk had fallen ere he was free to seek his mistress to give an account of the doings of the day.

This evening Joan sat reading, awaiting the manager's coming as usual. She did not doubt he was within by now, in his room, changing his working clothes and making himself presentable.

"A man outside is wishing to speak to you, Miss," the maid announced.

"A man? What man? Do I know him?" Joan queried, for usually Mr. Davenant dealt with the men.

"A strange man, Miss," she was told. "He wants to see you particularly."

"Very well, where is he?" and the girl rose and followed the maid to the back of the house, where a white-faced, undersized youth stood awaiting her.

"Hev'nin', Miss!" and he pulled off his hat, revealing a shock of black hair. "You maybe don't remember me, Miss."

Joan looked at the object and, as recollection came, she drew back. She had seen that white face with its staring, mad eyes before. She had beheld it convulsed with mad frenzy, hurling forth threats and imprecations against his mate, who was now dead.

"I remember," she said, "your name is Hansen."

"That's right, Miss. I'm 'Ansen, orl right."

"But I thought—Mr. Davenant said he hadn't engaged you this time."

"'E ain't goin' ter be hars'd, Miss. Fer wy, I'm 'ere on Union biz. I'm the Rep. this year, an' I come 'ere before-'and, ter see as this 'ere noo shed's orl right an' proper fer the men ter get ter work next week. I've got ter report, an' if it's not up ter the Union requirements, the men'll be called aht."

"I wonder you dare show your face here after last year, Hansen. You'd better not let Mr. Davenant catch you interfering in the shed," Joan told him. "He's not one to stand any nonsense of that sort." She wondered where Wilfred was. Perhaps it was as well this man had come first to her. But how annoyed the manager would be.

"Huh! I ain't afeared o' the likes of 'im," snorted Hansen. "If orls true, 'e ain't no great shucks."

"What did you want to see me for?" the girl demanded.

"It's abaht an 'orse, Miss. Bill Dawson wen 'e went awy last year lef' 'is horse behin' 'im."

"Well?"

"Well yer see, Miss, that 'orse is rightfully mine," he announced, with a cunning look at the girl.

"Yours? We thought Dawson left it."

"'E giv' it ter me, 'Miss, wen 'e wuz goin'. I most forgot abaht it till I seen it 'ere in the paddick to-dy."

"Then you mean to say the horse, Soap, as it is called, belongs to you?"

"Yes, Miss, though that ain't the name Bill giv 'im."

"And you intend claiming it now?"

"The 'orse is mine, Miss, an' I'm goin' ter clime 'im," he said, doggedly.

"Mr. Davenant will be sorry. He always rides that horse." As she spoke his name Wilfred appeared sauntering slowly towards them.

He had heard the voices from his room, recognising one as Hansen's. It must be now or never, he resolved. He would meet him in a guise as different as possible from

the man's recollection of his former mate. He took extra care over his toilet this evening. Seeking a rose from a vase on his mantelshelf, he placed it in his button-hole. From a drawer he took a cigar, given him by Stephen, and, with that between his lips, he surveyed himself in the mirror before venturing to show himself to his old enemy. He thought he need not fear recognition.

"What's all this about? What are you troubling Miss Fetherston for, my man? You should have come to me."

The manager's whole appearance, his cigar, his clear, incisive tone, struck Hansen to silence. "A bloomin' torf!" was his summing up later.

Even Joan looked with ill-concealed surprise at him. She had never seen him affect flowers in his button-hole before, and he always preferred a pipe to a cigar.

"This man—he is the Hansen who was here last year shearing—says that your horse, I mean the horse you always ride," she corrected, "belongs to him. He says it was given to him by Dawson before he left."

"That s right," Hansen agreed, finding his voice, of which the appearance of the new manager had for the moment robbed him.

"Did the horse belong to Dawson?" Wilfred asked him.

"It were 'is 'orse orl right. 'E rode 'im fer years. I seen 'im on 'im wen we wuz goin' abaht together."

"And you say he gave him to you?"

"That's right, wen 'e was leavin' 'ere."

"He left suddenly, I believe," Wilfred said.

"'E did that, you bet, an' fer wy? The p'liss 'udd 'av nabbed 'im if 'e'd wited fer 'em."

"Yet he waited long enough to tell you you might have his horse?" the manager persisted.

Hansen shuffled. He did not like this cross-examination. He could have "kidded" Miss Fetherston, he told himself, but the new manager was different.

"Well?" as Hansen remained silent.

"Bill jes' wited ter give me the 'orse before 'e done a bunk," he mumbled awkwardly.

"And of course you arranged for grazing the animal here all this time?"

"I forgot ter tike 'im awy, Mister, as I'm tellin' the lidy."

"And what did you tell her you had arranged about the grazing? It was with Mr. Rawlins, I presume."

"Wot cher givin' us, Mister. I ain't goin' ter py fer no grazin' the blanky 'orse. Ain't yer 'ad the use of 'im?"

"And we intend to go on using him, my good man, until the owner claims him," Wilfred told him. 'No, no, Hansen," as the little man was about to burst into an angry retort. "If the horse was given to you by this man Dawson, you'll have to bring him along to prove it. Till then we hold ourselves responsible for Dawson's property.."

Hansen spluttered protests, saying Dawson was dead, that he'd appeal to the Union fer justice, he'd write to *The Worker, etc.* Wilfred laughed at his futile threats.

"Prove Dawson gave him to you and I'll promise you Miss Fetherston will let you have him," he said. "But, if you try to get him by any other means, I warn you, I'll have you up for horse stealing."

Hansen slouched away, muttering threats.

"Do you think the horse really belongs to him?" Joan asked.

"No, I'm positive Dawson never gave it to anyone—you told me he disappeared immediately," he amended, seeing her about to question his first statement.

"I'm sorry Hansen has managed to get here after all," she said. "I'm afraid he may give you trouble."

"Let us hope not. I'll try and get rid of him before shearing begins," he told her.

"Would you like me to let the police know there may be trouble?" she asked.

"On no account, Miss Fetherston!" And he spoke so emphatically that she did not mention the subject again to him. She did, on her own responsibility, however, send a note to the sergeant of police at Colterton, informing him of the presence of a former shearer who had caused trouble the previous year, and she feared might stir up fresh trouble this season.

The sergeant replied, acknowledging her letter, and offering to dispatch a mounted trooper to keep order, unless she thought it unnecessary.

She did not tell the manager, as she did not think he would approve of her action, although he constantly urged her to interest herself in the running of the station and she, herself, was beginning to take a keen interest in it.

She saw no more of Hansen, and believed that Wilfred had got rid of him, as he said. But Hansen was keeping himself discreetly out of view during the few days ere the shearers arrived. He was afraid of the new manager, and had no intention of looking for trouble from that quarter. The shearers would arrive soon, and it was Hansen's intention to wait for a better opportunity to bring himself into prominence.

Hansen out of the way, Joan regretted her letter to the police sergeant. It had been unnecessary after all, and as he might possibly intend sending up a constable to keep order, she must write at once and stop him. The mail bag was just ready to go when she slipped in her note.

Wilfred came to her for it. He always took it down to the township post office, as Tom Rawlins had done.

Taking the letters out he was handing them to the post mistress when the address on Miss Fetherston's note caught his eye. A cold hand seemed to clutch his heart. Why had she written it? He must know, for ever since Hansen's arrival he had been in dread of discovery. Hansen had not shown up since their interview about the horse, but he might still be hatching mischief. He might have seen Joan again and roused her suspicions. The manager did not think he had any idea of his identity

that first evening, but later—how could he be sure he had not betrayed himself? He slipped the letter back into the bag.

"These all, Mr. Davenant?" the lady who acted as post mistress inquired, as she took them.

"Er—yes, that's all, Miss Perrit." He hoped her quick eye had not observed his action. Alone in his room he opened Joan's letter.

"Fool!" he muttered. "Double distilled fool, to suspect my beloved lady. Even if she knew, I don't believe she'd betray me. My Joan!" and he kissed the signature on the letter she had written. "My queen! I'd trust you with my life!"

He little suspected how soon his confident words were to be put to the proof.

It was too late after he read Joan's letter to dispatch it that day. The tri-weekly coach had already left. He put it in his pocket in the meantime, and having other matters to occupy him, forgot it.

The shearers were arriving, and upon interviewing them Wilfred felt satisfied there would be little trouble this year. For the most part they were steady, middle-aged men with families, anxious to earn as much as possible, travelling from shed to shed, from the northern stations to those down South—men who were not the sort to knock down their cheque at the first public house they came to.

Wilfred expressed to Joan his pleasure at the class of men who were arriving.

Miss Fetherston congratulated herself on having written that note to the police sergeant, but she did not mention it to the manager.

"I'm glad your first shearing season here is going to turn out so well," she told him. "It almost looks as if you were being too highly favored, Mr. Davenant—fine weather, good men, good conditions, a new, up-to-date shed," she enumerated gaily.

"The fleeces will cut lighter on account of the dry weather," he reminded her, smiling.

"I believe you're glad to find some fault among so many advantages," she told him. And she laughed with him, for they were young and hopeful, and it was Springtime and the world was going well with them just then.

"I believe I am," he confessed. "If everything went too smoothly I should be afraid Fate might have something up her sleeve."

"But as it is?" she queried.

"As it is, Miss Joan, I have no fear."

And these two, so content with themselves and each other, saw nought but the sunshine around them, while overhead the dark clouds were gathering swiftly, ready to burst.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A Confession.

Next day mounted-constable O'Donnel arrived at Windfells, to Joan's surprise.

"Didn't you get my letter telling you not to come?" she asked, when he presented himself.

"We got no letter except the one saying there might be trouble," he told her.

"You should have received it last evening. Mr. Davenant," turning to him, "you posted the letters yesterday. I remember putting it in the mail bag myself." She was puzzled what to think of it.

For answer Wilfred slowly drew the missing letter from his pocket, and handed it to her.

"You didn't post it?"

"No." He felt the reproach in her voice.

"But I put it in with the rest," she said. "Why did you take it out?" she felt hurt, rather than angry.

O'Donnel stood looking on more interested in the man's face than in Miss Fetherston. "Seems a bit fishy, don't it?" he commented.

Joan flushed at the sneering tone.

"Can't you explain, Mr. Davenant?" she urged, longing to shield him from the other, in spite of himself.

Wilfred's resolution was taken in that moment. He would tell Joan everything, and throw himself on her mercy. He felt confident of her faith.

"I'd rather explain to you privately, Miss Fetherston," he said to her.

O'Donnel's face was a study. Afraid of overstepping his duty and putting himself in the wrong, he dare not voice his suspicions. That the man before him had some-

thing to conceal, he felt certain, also that he stood in fear of him, O'Donnel. Therefore, it stood to reason, the constable argued, he must have broken the law in some way, and if so, it was his duty to discover it.

"It's risky, you know, tampering with mails, Mr. Davenant," he ventured to hint in a low voice to Wilfred as, in obedience to Joan's "Come to the office, please!" the manager was following her from the room.

Closing the door Wilfred turned to where the girl stood, her hand on the mantelpiece, the golden head resting on it as if she felt the need of some support. Her eyes, he thought, held some reproach.

"Well?" she asked, as he did not speak. "What reason had you for keeping back my letter, Mr. Davenant?"

"Because—I was afraid," he managed to say.

"Afraid! You were afraid of whom!" she demanded, incredulously.

"Of the police," he confessed, in a low voice.

"But—I don't understand. What reason have you to fear the police? And in any case, I wrote to stop O'Donnel coming," she reminded him.

"I know that now, but when I saw you had written I made sure you had found out—about me—that you knew who I was."

"Found out who you were?" Joan was mystified.

"Why, I know who you are, Mr. Davenant. You are the brother of my dear friend."

"You were right in fancying you had seen me before you came to Bunglatta," he went on, anxious to get it over and tell her the worst as soon as possible.

"But you told me we had never met," she reminded him, trying to recall the past.

"I said I had never spoken to you," he corrected. "It was true, but I had seen you, and you had seen me."

"When?" A great fear was seizing her. She sank into a chair, gazing at him wide-eyed.

"Last year. You remember the three shearers who came to interview you?"

"Yes—go on," she murmured, as he paused.

"Perry, and Hansen, and the other?" he continued.

"Dawson's dead," she said, hardly above a whisper.

"No." He found it even harder than he feared. "Dawson did not die."

"But—the body they found in the ranges ——"

"Was not Dawson," he affirmed.

"How do you know? You never saw him," and there was a note of pleading in the girl's voice.

He wondered if she suspected. When she knew, all must be at an end between them, all this sweet companionship that had made his recent life an enchanted existence. He had known it could not last, better make an end at once.

"Because—I am Bill Dawson."

"You! Dawson! Oh!" As the horrified cry broke from her she made a swift rush for the door to escape, but he was quicker, and it was his arms that held her and crushed her to him.

"Joan!" he cried. "Joan!"

"Oh, no, no!" she gasped, terror-stricken at his revelation. "Wilfred—say you didn't mean that. Say you only meant to frighten me," she implored.

"Joan! sweetheart!" A thrill went through him as she ceased to struggle. He pressed hot kisses on her lips. "I loved you at that moment as I have loved you every minute of my life since."

"But it wasn't you, Wilfred," she said, piteously. "Say it wasn't you. It couldn't have been—that man," She shuddered at the thought of him.

"I wish to heaven I could deny it," he said. "And yet, when I think of you as you stood there, with your dear, brave eyes defying us all, Perry, and me, and Hansen."

"She broke in quickly. "Hansen!" she exclaimed. "He's the man Dawson knocked down."

"He insulted you," he told her.

"And I thought it a brutal act. But—oh!" she placed her hands against his shoulders and tried to force herself free. She might as easily try to bend a bar of iron with her fingers. He saw the fear return to her eyes, and it hurt him.

"What is it, sweetheart?" he asked, gently.

"Dawson!" she gasped, in a horrified whisper. "Dawson was the man who set fire to the shed and nearly—nearly" her lips refused to frame the words of the awful accusation against the man whose arms held her.

"Never! it was a lie, Joan. I never, in my life, set fire to any man's property. I have enough sins on my conscience, sweetheart, but that's not one of them," he told her."

She longed to believe him. "But they accused Dawson of it," she repeated. "They said they had evidence."

"I know, and I was afraid of being caught. I couldn't disprove it. All the evidence would have been against me. Hansen would have sworn anything to get even with me."

"Hansen's here now," she said, with a start.

"I'll get rid of him. I'm afraid of that man, Joan. He's had a grudge against me for years."

"You've known him a long time, then?" she asked.

"I've shorn in numbers of different sheds alongside him. He's as mad as a hatter, and none of the others would put up with him, so he generally attached himself to me."

"You—or rather Dawson—was accused of starting other fires," she said, a thought striking her. "Do you remember if Hansen was with you when they occurred?"

"He was, but what has that got to do with me?" he asked.

"He may have set fire to them for you to bear the blame," she suggested.

"By Jove, Joan! I never thought of that, and he was at every one, too." He no longer held her closely, but she made no move to withdraw from his arms.

"You didn't want him here this year. Were you afraid he might burn it down again?"

"No, I had no reason to suspect him more than the others. I was afraid he might recognise me."

She let her eyes rest on him with a long, searching look. Then with a sigh: "You are so utterly different, dearest. Even I, now that I know, cannot trace any resemblance," she told him. Then, smiling, "I'm going to pretend to myself it's not true. That you made it all up just to tease me."

"I'd give the world if I could pretend it, too. I've lived so long in hell—of my own making, but none the less a hell—that I began to despair of ever getting free," he told her, sorrowfully.

"My poor Wilfred," and she drew his head down to meet her lips. "Does anyone else know?"

"Only Steve," he told her.

"Then we needn't be afraid it will ever be known," she assured him.

"And we'll do our best to forget it, sweetheart."

"No, no, I don't think I want to forget, now that I know. I like to know that you loved me the first time you saw me, even though I did feel frightened of you—and no wonder." She laughed happily, nestling closer in his arms.

"And I have felt so horribly jealous of other fellows," he informed her.

"Jealous?" She had felt jealous, too, she remembered.

"Of Wells and Rawlins," he explained.

"Poor Tom!" and she felt sorry for the man now that she knew what love was.

"He would have made you a better husband than I," he told her, but she would hear none of it.

"How pleased Nell will be," Joan realised she would now have her friend for a sister.

"I stole your photograph from Nell when I first went to Bunglatta," Wilfred informed her, taking out the packet containing it. "It's an old one, but I love it."

As he unwrapped it, something fell to the floor. Joan stooped and picked up a ring set with pink coral.

She held it in her hand, looking from it to the man in utter amazement. "My ring," and as he remained silent, "My ring," she repeated. "Where did you find it, Wilfred?"

He took it from her, and raising her left hand, slipped it on her finger.

"I found it there," he said, lifting it to his lips.

"But—oh! I'm all in the dark!" she cried, covering her eyes in the effort to recall the past. "Tell me what it all means, Wilfred," she begged. "Tell me how you came to have my ring."

"I stole that, too," he told her.

"But how—how? Was it you who took it from my finger?"

"Yes."

"But how came you to be there? If you are Dawson, he had gone before Perry carried me out of the shed."

"Perry didn't," he said. "Perry only took charge of you after you were got out."

Something spoke to her of feeling strong arms about her body twelve months ago, arms such as now encircled her, raising her, bearing her through that furnace of flame, out beneath the star-lit sky, where the cool breath from heaven brought relief to her aching lungs. The truth burst on her.

"It was you!" she cried aloud with the joy of it.

"My love, my love!"

She gave herself to him fully, freely, for was she not

already his by right of conquest? Had he not fought the flames for her life and won?

"Why did Perry let us think it was he saved me?" she asked, after some minutes.

"When I handed you to him I slipped away in the darkness. He knew I daren't show up, so played for his own hand," Wilfred told her.

"I—we couldn't understand how Perry escaped being injured," she said. "You were burnt badly, I remember, Miss Homfrey told us, but of course, she couldn't have known how you came by it."

"She believed what I told her—that it was done by a branding iron," he assured her, in his ignorance of women of the Louise Homfrey type. "She was awfully kind in looking after it for me."

"I used to think once you cared for Miss Homfrey, Wilfred."

He laughed happily. "Before ever I saw her my heart was in the keeping of the only woman in the world I shall ever love," he told her.

"We have forgotten O'Donnel," she said, with a start, coming back unwillingly, it seemed, to the present. "I wish you had posted the letter, Wilfred, I'm afraid of O'Donnel guessing something."

The man laughed to reassure her. "A good meal and his glass of beer will soothe his feelings if he objects to being sent all this way on a wild goose chase," he said.

Again she scanned the face of the man she loved for any trace of that other. But she could find none.

"Wilfred, promise me something," and she raised the blue eyes he thought so like a little bit of heaven, and her glance of appeal was not to be denied.

"Anything, sweetheart," he told her, without a moment's hesitation.

"If—if there should be any difficulty—any trouble with the men—promise you will be careful."

"There won't be any trouble this year," he said.

"But if there is," she persisted. "If Hansen or—or any others say anything to annoy you, promise you won't interfere."

"Dearest girl, what is troubling you now?" he asked, not seeing her drift.

"You're so ready to knock a man down," she reminded him, "and if you did, it might set them talking and they might suspect."

"I promise," he said, " so you can make your mind easy."

"No matter what is said, you will do nothing, for my sake," she urged.

"I promise," he repeated.

"Even if Hansen—or—anyone should be insulting like he was before," she pressed him still.

"No one of them will have the power to make me use violence, Joan," he assured her. "I was a different man before. Now, sweetheart, I have something to live up to, something sweet and beautiful that has taken the old revengeful temper out of me for ever."

And she was at last content.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The Blow Falls.

Mounted-constable O'Donnel was not in a good temper. Mr. Wilfred Davenant's explanation may have been satisfactory to Miss Fetherston, as she had assured him was the case, and, judging by the light in her pretty eyes and her blushing cheeks, as she met O'Donnel, she was more than satisfied. But he had been brought all these miles for nothing, and he wanted to know why.

As he had remarked, there seemed to be something very "fishy" about that abstracted letter. Also, why did the manager give the explanation in private, and why was he, O'Donnel, not also taken into confidence and informed what the explanation explained. These were some of the questions to which he wanted an answer, lacking which, he was not in the best of humors.

Even the ample lunch Miss Fetherston sent in to him, though it comforted the inner man, failed to propitiate him. During the meal he turned his mind towards finding some solution which, if not entirely satisfactory, at least might account for the look he had surprised on Wilfred's face, for it was a look of apprehension, if not actual fear. O'Donnel had sufficient experience in reading men not to be deceived in such a circumstance. Wilfred Davenant had shown alarm at the constable's advent, had tampered with a letter for some reason—kept secret, had revealed that reason, or excused his action in some way to the writer of the letter, keeping him, O'Donnel, in the dark. The whole transaction looked more than "fishy." What had Davenant to fear? What past act of his might have brought him up against the law?—for that was what it came to. After all, O'Donnel reflected, his journey to Windfells might not be wasted. He knew little of Stephen Davenant's younger brother, and that only by rumor. He had never seen him before that he knew of. But that

did not necessarily mean the police in other parts did not know him.

In the meantime he would glean what information he could from the men on the place, hearsay evidence certainly, but he might hit upon something useful. Strolling down towards the hut he got into conversation. Old Jacob, a station hand of a garrulous kind, was ready enough to talk on any subject raised, and the constable found no difficulty in plumbing the depths of his knowledge. He could tell of rumors, chiefly relating to fast-living and money lost on the turf. The men thought no worse of the boss for that. Any one of them would have done the same—given the chance. The men liked him all right. He treated them as if they were human beings, old Jacob averred, "though 'e won't stand no nonsense." He knew what a man was capable of doing, and if he didn't choose to do it he could go elsewhere.

"Oh ye-es! 'E's a bit of orl ri-ight!"

The one thing that stuck in O'Donnel's memory, after his conversation with old Jacob and the others, was a chance remark that when Wilfred Davenant first appeared at Bunglatta, it was midnight, and nobody but his brother knew how or whence he came. Food for suspicion here, a man coming at night from nowhere! he reflected, with relish. But he got no further at present. He tried the shearers, but they gave him little encouragement. Long Jim Kelly, from Warrnambool way, who had shorn up and down the district for years, could tell him nothing, never having set eyes on Wilfred Davenant before, though he had shorn at Bunglatta often "before they got them blanky machines." He also had heard rumors of Stephen Davenant's ne'er-do-well brother, but none of the chaps at Bunglatta had ever set eyes on him, as far as he knew. Stephen bought the place from old Tomlinson, after selling out his place in Gippsland, he had heard—he couldn't say he troubled his head about his employer's business. He had enough to do minding his own.

The rest of the shearers were no more communicative. They were inclined to resent O'Donnel's presence among

them, being a fairly quiet, steady going lot, out to earn good money, not to hang up the work for nothing. They had seen little of the boss as yet, but shearing was just about to start, and what was the idea of the "John" coming here and asking a lot of bally questions about people who did not concern him, anyway? They took men as they found them and, if the boss treated them fair, they intended treating him likewise.

Of course, they knew all about last year, and the shed being burnt by that chap who lost his life in the bush fire. However, that was none of their business. They had no wish to manufacture trouble for themselves or others. The present agreement was satisfactory, and they reckoned the Union made a big mistake sending that bloke Hansen, to mess things up.

Wilfred found O'Donnel just about to leave when he himself arrived at the shed. He looked at it, well pleased with the new structure. Several improvements, some suggested by his predecessor, and several by himself, commended themselves to the men.

Shearing would start with a full board. The weather was keeping up well. He saw no reason for apprehension that all might not go smoothly this season on the station.

O'Donnel came up to take leave. "Fine new shed here," he observed, critically. "I saw the old one, day after it got burnt."

"This is ever so much more convenient," Wilfred informed him.

"Suppose so. Ever see the old one?" he questioned, idly.

"I've seen the plan of it." His brain was so full of his happiness that he was forgetting his usual caution.

"So?" O'Donnel still thought there was something fishy about that letter, and believed he had not yet heard the last of it. "Well, I must be going. So long!" and, flinging his leg across the saddle, he rode slowly away.

Wilfred was thankful to see his back. The uniform of the police, mounted or foot, had the effect of a douche of

cold water down his spine. However, now that the representative of the law had taken his departure, his self-confidence reasserted itself. He told himself he was a fool to be scared by shadows. There was no possible danger of his being recognised now. Joan, herself, had declared he was changed beyond recognition. Besides, none of the station hands at Windfells had the faintest suspicion that the present manager, their boss, had ever figured among them in another capacity.

The shearers were all strangers, with the exception of Hansen, and he was not engaged by the station.

Come to think of it, what right had he to be there at all? It was only an excuse for stirring up trouble among the men. Wilfred determined to get rid of him at once.

He came upon him haranguing the men who were lounging round smoking, while they listened with an amused tolerance to his frothy diatribes.

"Now then, Hansen, you just clear out of this!" Wilfred called out, approaching the groups forming the audience.

The little man turned with a snarl, angry at being cut short in the middle of one of his most carefully prepared arguments.

"Clear aht!" he echoed, as if questioning whether he could have heard correctly.

"Yes! Clear out, I said, and look sharp about it."

"Yer don't mean I ain't ter sty on 'ere ternight, boss?" the fellow demanded.

"I won't have you about the place another hour—so just you be off quick and lively."

"An' 'oo are you, I'd like ter know, orderin' me off of the plice like's yer wuz the hemperor of Roosia? Don't yer know as me—'Ansen's 'ere ter represent the Union?" he spluttered.

"I don't care if you're here to represent the devil, off you get, the quicker the better," Wilfred insisted.

He was resolved the man should leave before he had time to work mischief. At the same time he did not intend to lose his temper over the business. He had promised Joan he would remain calm whatever happened. She had been right to remind him, he acknowledged, for he could not be too cautious. His own safety depended on it.

"Mr. Rawlins allus let the Rep. stay 'ere." Hansen protested, hotly.

"I'm not Mr. Rawlins," Davenant told him.

"No, you ain't—you ain't 'arf the man 'e wuz. Mr. Rawlins wuz a jennelman; you're nobbut a blanky ——"

"No lip, Hansen," Wilfred warned him.

"A blitherin' blighter of a jile-bird," he jeered.

"Get out of this!"

The men gathered closer, enjoying the row.

"Yah! 'oo cares fer you? Fine feathers mikes fine birds, doesn't they? Thinks the lidy up at the 'ouse 'll tike yer fer 'er new mash, don't yer?"

"Cut that, Hansen!" Wilfred was getting dangerous, but the other failed to realise the fact.

"Tikin' Rawlins's leavin's ——"

With a roar like an angry bull Wilfred was upon him. The little man dodged too late, and the full force of the blow caught him behind his ear, sending him spinning.

There was a muttered growl among the onlookers.

"Serve the vermin right—'e asked for it," someone voiced the general opinion.

Wilfred walked away from the spot. He had broken his promise—the first his liege-lady had asked of him. He had failed her. But how could he help himself? No man in his place could have done otherwise.

Hansen picked himself up slowly, his eyes protruding like a crayfish's.

"Gawd!" he whispered. "It's 'im!" He was trembling like a colt at its first handling.

Nobody marked his going as he slunk away.

A little later Wilfred, returning, saw he was no longer there. "A good riddance," he said to himself, and straightway put him out of his thoughts.

It was not until some time afterwards one of the men called his attention to two horsemen approaching. "Blimy, boss! if it ain't the blanky John comin' back again—an' 'Ansen with 'im. Well, I'm jiggered!"

As soon as Wilfred caught sight of them he scented trouble. Hansen had jumped on a horse and ridden after O'Donnel, whom he had overtaken. Now they were returning together.

"Blimy if the little bloke ain't goin' to give you in charge for assaultin' 'im, Mr. Davenant," the man asserted amid a roar of laughter from his mates.

Wilfred knew better. He knew that at last the bolt was about to fall. He guessed what had happened. In spite of Joan's warning, in spite of his promise to her, he had given himself away. Hansen had recognised him. It was not the first time the fellow had felt the strength of Wilfred's fist, and he knew it again now. Not without some very good reason would O'Donnel have been induced to turn back, certainly not because the boss had knocked Hansen down for being impudent. If only he had remembered his promise—if only he could have held his hand, he thought, with bitter regret, as the realisation of his folly overwhelmed him.

Any doubts he may have entertained—any hopes he may have cherished as to the possibility of his being mistaken, were dispelled as soon as the two drew near.

"That's the blighter there! That's Bill Dawson hisself, Mr. O'Donnel! Tike 'im, don't let 'im give yer the slip this time," yelled Hansen, excitedly. "The 'undred quids mine fer givin' the first infermation. Don't ferget it wuz me as giv' yer the orfice. Lawdy! ain't it 'im fer a gen'rous bloke achuckin' an 'undred quid at me' ed this wy. Hy don't think!"

Wilfred's brain worked feverishly. If he could only bluff O'Donnel that it was the result of Hansen's diseased fancy he might yet save himself, he thought desperately, but then he remembered—and now bitterly regretted—the episode of the letter.

O'Donnel's smouldering suspicion was now probably fanned into flame. Hope of sharing in the reward would no doubt urge him on to the capture of a notorious criminal.

The men, seeing promise of yet another entertainment provided for them, too good to miss, gathered closer.

"What's that blasted insect drivin' at?" asked one man, and so occupied was he with the scene before him that he did not notice his omission to kindle the tobacco in the pipe he was pulling at.

"Don't 'erget!" Hansen screamed, as he got down. "It wuz me as lied yer on to 'im first."

O'Donnel dismounted and, throwing his rein to one of the men, approached.

"This chap says he recognises you for a man we've been after this last twelve months, Mr. Davenant. He says you're the man as set fire to the shed last year—Bill Dawson."

"It's a lie. I never set fire to any shed in my life," Wilfred declared, glad that he could tell even half a truth.

"Well, I must say it don't sound likely, but Hansen swears you're the man."

"It's 'im, I tells yer, I'll take me dyin' oath 'e's Bill Dawson 'isself. Don't let 'im kid you 'e ain't," Hansen screamed, dancing round them at a safe distance from the terrible fist.

"Will you give me your word of honor you're not the same man, Mr. Davenant?" asked the constable, pulled two ways—desire to capture a dangerous criminal, and fear of making a fool of himself.

"I'll give you nothing, O'Donnel," Wilfred told him, doggedly.

"Well—I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to come with me."

"Will you come?" asked the constable.

"No."

"Tike 'im wiv you, don't let 'im eskipe," urged Hansen, fearful of reprisals from his enemy.

"I warn you it's a serious matter, resisting the police," he said. "Be reasonable, Mr. Davenant, give me your word you'll come quietly. Otherwise I'll have to use force. Will you come?"

"No!" repeated Wilfred, shifting his position so that the wall of the shed was at his back.

An eager row of faces gathered behind O'Donnel, Hansen still agitatedly screaming advice to him from the background.

"Don't let 'im kid you 'e ain't Bill. I knows Bill s'wells I knows you, Mr. O'Donnel."

"Very well, if you will have it," and the constable drew from his pocket a pair of handcuffs. Approaching Wilfred, "Put out your hands, Dawson," he ordered.

"If you come a step nearer, I'll lay you out," Wilfred threatened in a tone that stopped the other's advance.

"You're acting foolishly, Mr. Davenant, or William Dawson," he said, "and only making things worse for yourself. Men, I call on you in the King's name, help me take that man!"

Nobody stirred, except Hansen, who took up a safe position behind O'Donnel.

The others looked on, refusing to take one side or the other. He might be Dawson, but then again he mightn't. Shearing was to start to-morrow, and there was no fun in losing their job by siding against the boss.

O'Donnel's jaw took an ugly look.

"On your own head be it then, Dawson! I'm going to have you alive or dead!" and he drew his revolver.

"That's the gime! Shoot 'im, shoot the ——" Hansen fairly foamed at the mouth in his frenzy.

So this was to be the end! Shot down as a criminal! A fitting end to a wasted life. Better so, perhaps, than face what might be to come. Wilfred told himself. Then Joan's image rose in his mind—Joan, with her beautiful soul and her great all-forgiving love. No, he couldn't quit like a coward and leave her to suffer and sorrow alone. He was about to yield when a cry of distress, a flutter of blue, and with a sob Joan herself was clinging to him.

Someone had told her what was going on down at the shed.

"Wilfred!" she moaned. Oh, Wilfred!"

As his arms closed round her there was a click and he felt the hard iron grip his wrists.

O'Donnel stood back with a grin.

The girl turned herself about within the enclosing circle of his arms, and saw his fettered hands.

"How dare you!" she flashed indignantly. "Take them off this instant."

"Sorry, Miss Fetherston, but he's brought it on himself," the constable told her. "I asked him to go quiet and he threatened to do for me, so—I had to do it," he finished.

"How did they discover it, dearest, who told them?" she asked him, in a smothered voice, as she turned once more to him.

"That skunk Hansen," he told her. "Sold me for the reward."

"And they'll take you away from me?" she said, brokenly.

"Dearest! Only for a little while," he lied.

"Let me come, too, Wilfred." she begged.

"Impossible, sweetheart! You must stay on here and work for both of us. Let Steve know as soon as you can—he'll do all that can be done for me, I know. Your place is here, dear one. Thank heaven things are sufficiently forward to go on with the shearing. They'll have to do the

best they can without me," he said, gloomily. Then, seeing that he would release her, she bent herself down beneath his arms. Taking his hands between her own she pressed them fondly to her face and he felt her tears on them.

"We were so happy, Wilfred!" she moaned. "Too happy! We might have known it couldn't last."

"Go, now, dear one!" he begged. "It only makes it harder for us both ——" he turned away, his face working.

"I'll see you again before he—before you leave me?" she pleaded.

"I'll ask O'Donnel to let me say good-bye," he promised, and with a long, agonised look of farewell, she passed slowly up the path to the house.

"Sorry Miss Fetherston's taking it so hard. Didn't know there was anythin' between her and you, Dawson," O'Donnel said to him.

Wilfred looked at him. "My name's not Dawson," he said. "You know I'm Stephen Davenant's brother as well as I do."

"Do I? P'raps—but I dunno what name you were goin' by this time twelve months back. By the saints! we'll soon see, though!" O'Donnel exclaimed, with a triumphant slap on his thigh. "Bill Dawson had his initials W.D. tattooed on his left arm!"

"So 'e 'ad, so 'e 'ad. I seen 'em orfen wen we wuz workin' together," Hansen shouted, following in the other's rear, as approaching the prisoner O'Donnel roughly caught hold of his left arm and dragged up the sleeve.

There was nothing to be seen on it but the healed scar left from an old burn.

O'Donnel chewed on his discomfiture.

Hansen peered over with open mouth and unbelieving eyes, and the rest of the men came over to look, too. Wilfred grinned in derision, which rattled O'Donnel still more.

"Dunno!" he observed. "There ain't any sign of the letters left, but I'm not saying they've never been there. How'd you get that burn?" he demanded, sharply.

"I'll not tell you," Wilfred answered.

"Umph! Afraid of lettin' out too much? Well, there's enough against you already, Dawson ——"

"I tell you I'm Wilfred Davenant. You said yourself the man you're after had letters tattooed on his arm; you see I have none."

The constable was nonplussed. He had made so sure of his man, had already felt part of the hundred pounds reward in his own pocket—a bribe from Hansen.

Wilfred saw his doubts.

"Look here, O'Donnel, I'll go with you quietly, I give you my word," and he held out his hands. "if you'll take these off, like a good fellow."

"All right—I'll risk it, Mr. Davenant—Dawson—only" he— touched his revolver pocket.

Hansen insisted on accompanying them, an arrangement Wilfred encouraged. In his last interview with Joan, in the presence of the constable, he urged her to put Stephen and his lawyers to work instituting inquiries as to Hansen's antecedents and his past life. O'Donnel was ready to make inquiries also, especially as to the identity of the shearers and others employed on the various stations which had suffered from incendiary fires. He agreed to communicate with other police stations on the matter, so that a fairly comprehensive chain of evidence should be available.

"And with the dressin' up them lawyers is able to give to it," he told Wilfred, "it looks as if it may be a good line of defence."

The blow fell heaviest on Joan. The need to bestir herself kept her from breaking down. Wilfred left it to her to take the reins he had perforce to drop, and she resolved to guide things as he would wish. She had learnt from Rawlins, and from her lover in the last few months, more than she had ever thought to learn. The accounts were in

her hands wholly. It was Rawlins' suggestion, and Wilfred made a point of it. It occupied her mind now, taking it away from her present trouble, though that was never absent from her thoughts either.

Stephen responded at once to her piteous little note sent by Fergus on horseback. He would do everything possible. There would be no difficulty in getting the magistrate to grant bail. The magistrate was a friend of his own, he mentioned naively.

Joan felt comforted with the knowledge that others were at work for Wilfred's succour, but her own grief was very heavy, and doubt and anguish gnawed at her heart.

To the men on the place the arrest of the boss had something of the effect of the disturbance of an ant's nest. Nobody wanted to settle down to work at once, so they decided to take a day off in honor of the occasion. Such a choice morsel of gossip, such food for discussion, for argument for and against, had never occurred before in their lives.

"Ter think of 'im bein' Dawson all this time!"

"Lordy! 'Ow 'e must a larfed at us blokes fer bein' so easy took in."

"Come the respectable gent over us suckin' innercents 'e could, too!"

"That's right! Did the boss biz. like a blanky torf, 'e did."

"Well, I should smile!"

"My oath! an' 'im aridin' of 'is own blanky 'orse all this time an' us blinkin' idiots never droppin' to it!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Dark Clouds Overhead.

The days that followed were a time of mental anguish to the mistress of Windfells. Up till now her life had been carefree. Owner of broad acres which yielded a comfortable income, healthy, happy, courted for herself apart from her possessions, beautiful and cultivated, she had been the envy of less fortunate damsels. Now, at one stroke, Fate had dealt such a blow that the proud beauty who held herself so far removed from petty worries that beset the path of the less well dowered, would have thought it happiness could she have had the man she loved with her in safety in the poorest of homes. What were broad acres to her if he should be condemned to languish in a prison? What was money to her when he might suffer cold, solitude and sorrow, separated from the woman he loved? Truly in those days was the fair head with its crown of golden hair brought down to the dust.

Her own household, though they might feel sympathy, were powerless to help. Aunt Lavinia, with the best intentions in the world, did and said the thing that had much better have been left undone and unspoken.

"That unfortunate young man," was her favorite mode of speaking of Wilfred, "for I really can't call him Mr. Davenant, my dear. It would not be polite to Mr. Stephen, his brother. Such a terrible thing for the rest of the Davenants."

"It's only terrible for Wilfred," Joan answered, "to be falsely accused."

"I hope it may prove so, of course, but ——" and Mrs. Robson's "buts" were very eloquent, and brought fresh pain to the girl's strained and quivering nerves. She had taken to avoiding her aunt, seeking to be alone with her trouble. Mrs. Robson suggested having a friend up to stay with her.

"It would liven us up a bit, my dear," she told her niece, "and I'm sure I, for one, find the house very dull since Mr.—er—since that unfortunate young man was—er—left us."

Joan, refusing at first to be comforted, changed her mind and sent for Nell.

"Well, of course, Nell Davenant's better than nobody," her aunt conceded, "though one can't forget she's the unfortunate young man's sister—it's not her fault, of course, but it makes things awkward. For instance, I shall always have to remember when I'm talking about him before her."

"You never stop to consider my feelings," Joan reminded her.

"You're a Fetherston, my dear, not a Davenant."

Nell came, and Joan found great consolation in her presence. Even Mrs. Robson acknowledged it was pleasant to have a third person in the house under the circumstances, and she did not even find it awkward talking about Wilfred to his sister.

"I don't suppose poor, dear Joan will continue this engagement she talks of now," she surmised one day to Nell.

"I've no doubt she will," Nell told her.

"But, my dear, suppose he has to go to prison!"

"Then Joan will wait till he comes out, Mrs. Robson," the girl said, with decision.

The old lady gave a little, horrified exclamation.

"But, my dear, how can you suggest that my niece would ally herself with a—a convict?" finished Aunt Lavinia, aghast.

"If a woman loves a man she will not desert him because he has the misfortune to be wrongly accused of a crime," Nell affirmed. If Wilfred Davenant could have heard these two girls maintaining their faith in his innocence, his heart would have been gladdened.

They were a great deal to each other, for each knew the other's trouble. It helped Joan to bear her own when

she saw her friend made happy by the receipt of one of Tom Rawlins' letters to herself, and she wondered if there would ever be a closer bond between those two.

Miss Fetherston still interested herself in the book-keeping (had not Wilfred begged her to do so?) but otherwise she left things to Stephen's administration. He was frequently at Windfells, besides numerous trips to town on Wilfred's behalf.

"He's a charming man—so thoughtful," Mrs. Robson told Nell. "One would never take him for that unfortunate young man's brother."

"We think Wilfred the better looking," Nell informed her.

"Yes, the young man certainly has good looks—or had," Mrs. Robson corrected. "I doubt if he'll be as good looking when he's thin."

"What should make him thin?" queried the girl, innocently.

"Well, my dear, he can't expect to be as well fed in—er—while he's incarcerated as he was here. I remember how he used to enjoy Cook's apple-pies—two helpings always. The poor young man will miss Cook's apple-pies, I'm afraid."

Joan fled from the room. Nell, seeking her later, found her pacing the garden path.

"She makes me long to scream sometimes," the girl said, as Nell, twining her arm about her, fell into step.

"And she feels for you so much, really, but she cannot help saying just what's in her mind."

They walked up and down in silence. It was the unspoken sympathy that helped Joan to live through that time, that and the letters from Wilfred, for he wrote by every mail.

Stephen had obtained his brother's release, on bail, as he promised. There were clever men at work on the case, and they must hope for the best, he told her.

Then Joan had an inspiration. She, too, would help to find evidence to acquit him. She would find Perry.

She remembered how Wilfred had refused to have Perry back—she almost had a quarrel with him over it. How long ago it seemed now, yet it was but the other day Wilfred had refused to give her the man's address, and had torn up his letter—so short a time that the basket by the office desk might still contain the scraps if she could piece them together. It required patience, but Joan succeeded in her search. One small scrap containing a street number eluded her for some time, but she at last obtained even that.

Perry's address in her possession, she wondered what her next course should be. She might write to him herself, letting him know that his evidence was important in saving his old mate from a miscarriage of justice. But how could she be certain Perry would reply. He had reaped the benefit of Wilfred's silence so far. He might fear the law in his own case, for he had taken a reward which he had not merited.

She decided to write to Stephen Davenant's solicitors, who had charge of the defence.

She would relate to them in full Wilfred's part the night of the fire, she thought he might not mention it himself—she would send Perry's address to them and beg them to have the man found. He would probably still be employed at one of the stations farther south, for shearing was not yet completed in the cooler parts, where the grass burrs ripen later.

Everything that might help she set down in her letter, with an earnest appeal to spare no effort for the acquittal of her fiancè.

When she had dispatched her letter she felt happier. At least she was doing something for her lover, instead of only sitting and waiting while others, strangers, without the spur that urged her on, worked in his behalf.

She knew the case would not come on for hearing yet, having been postponed for a later sitting of the court, and she was thankful for the reprieve, though the burden of waiting for them both was very terrible.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The Departure of Miss Homfrey.

Nell Davenant stayed on at Windfells until a pleading note from Kitty called her back to Bunglatta.

Miss Homfrey was leaving them. It was terrible to contemplate, she wrote, and however she should get along without the governess she really did not know. Miss Homfrey had suited them so well. She had been such a comfort in the house ever since she first came. Kitty could never have imagined she would want to leave them like this. She had done her best to persuade her to stay on, even if it were only for a few years, until Tottie should be old enough to go to a boarding school. She had offered to increase her salary, but the governess was not to be enticed to stay, even in that way.

"I asked her what fault she had to find with us that she should be so determined to leave," Kitty wrote, pouring out her grievance, "and she says she has none. She admits she has been well treated, and you know, yourself, we have treated her like one of the family ever since she came. I have told her I think it rather inconsiderate of her. She might have paid some attention to our convenience and given more than four weeks' notice, which is all I shall have to find somebody else. You really must come home, Nell; perhaps you may have some influence in inducing her to stay."

Of course, Nell returned to her sister-in-law, and equally, of course, she did not persuade Miss Homfrey to change her mind. Nor did she try very hard. For, though she appreciated the good work the governess had done while in charge of the children's education, she did not think Kitty would find much difficulty in filling her place.

Strange to say, Stephen was the one least surprised at Miss Homfrey's departure. "We couldn't expect a woman like her to waste all the best years of her life buried alive up here, my dear," he told his wife.

Kitty warmly resented this remark. She was not accustomed to hear her husband refer to his home in such a way.

"It's different for you," he said. "It's our home; possibly Miss Homfrey wants a home of her own. She may be getting married."

"Whom could she marry, Steve? There's no one here that we know of who wants to marry her, though at one time you did have a ridiculous notion about her and Wilfred."

"Which you promptly squashed by mentioning that she would be thrown away on him," he reminded her.

"That's before I knew the ingratitude of the woman," Kitty said.

"And, by your own assertion, that there is no one here for her to marry, you state an excellent reason for her wishing to leave us," her husband went on.

"Of course, you take her part against me. That's so like a man," Kitty told him. "The bother of the children won't fall on you. I'll have it all."

"And Nell," he reminded her, for his sister was much more likely to take over the responsibility of Teddy and Tottie than was their mother.

"It's a blessing I have Nell to help me," she admitted. "They're beyond me sometimes, and Miss Homfrey was so splendid with them ——" she lamented, with a sigh.

"So you would condemn poor Miss Homfrey to pass her youth in licking our young cubs into shape," he observed, quietly, "I think she is worthy of a higher destiny."

"You seem to have conceived a great admiration for her lately," Kitty told him, sharply.

"No, my dear, I discovered some months ago she was a very clever woman. I cannot say her wishing to leave us has taken me by surprise."

To Teddy and Tottie, the news that Miss Homfrey was going away from them for ever came as a disruption of

the whole mechanism of their world. She had previously left for a few weeks at a time when she took her holiday in town. These absences of their monitor the children had come to regard as red letter days. They could do as they liked without being threatened with innumerable lines of Gordon's poems to be committed to memory. But to hear she was going away and would never come back to them was another matter. The consciences of both became much troubled, for it must have been something in their own conduct which had caused the governess to wish to leave them. Both promised to mend their ways, and never be naughty any more, if only dear Miss Homfrey would not go away. It was hard to make them believe their behaviour had nothing to do with her going, and Tottie remained inconsolable. Teddy, it was decided, was getting too old to be under a governess at home. He would be sent to the Grammar Preparatory School in town. When informed of the decision he held himself proudly till the full meaning of the banishment from home fell upon him. He used his promotion to crow over Tottie, who was threatened with a new governess.

"She's sure to be horrid and stuck up, and won't let you out of her sight. And you won't be able to make any more mud-pies, or go for rides on Timor, or sail boats in the dam, or catch yabbies, for fear you get your frock dirty, you'll see!" Teddy predicted.

"I don't care, I'll still have Aunty Nell," was Tottie's consoling argument.

Teddy became grave. His little heart would sometimes thump painfully at the thought of being cast alone into a world of strange boys.

"I wish I had Uncle Wilfred," he said. "I'd get him to tell me all about what they do at school."

"Daddy'd tell you," Tottie suggested.

"Gar'n! Daddy's too old to remember when he was a boy," Teddy exclaimed, with the usual child's idea of relative ages.

But when Teddy inadvertently repeated his wish in the domestic quarters of the household, he met with scant encouragement. The maid servants, to whom he unburdened his little soul, winked at one another and indulged in meaning looks and equivocal grins, opining that he ought to be thankful he was not in his Uncle Wilfred's shoes.

The words and their manner of telling it hurt Teddy, for he felt the mystery hanging round the deeds of his relative, this uncle of whom he had made a hero. It was cruel of them to hint at something unspoken. He had asked, but received only vague answers. Nobody would tell him what his uncle had done to be treated in this way. He guessed it must be something naughty, because he knew a policeman had come to Joan's place and taken Uncle Wilfred away. So, altogether, Teddy's heart was very sore just at this time.

It was left to Miss Homfrey to administer the one bit of comfort that fell to him. When bidding him good-bye she asked what he would like her to send him from Queensland.

The child's eyes brightened, for Queensland, he had learnt in his geography lessons, was the home of wild blackfellows—he had seen pictures of them, naked, with spears and waddies and boomerangs—fierce looking fellows. If Miss Homfrey were going there she would be able to get such weapons, and when he should go to school in Melbourne it would be fine to say he had a blackfellow's spear from Queensland.

"Very well, Teddy, I won't forget," she promised, when he made his request, and she did not, for some weeks later a parcel arrived at Bunglatta—a queer-shaped parcel—and it contained for Teddy a real black-fellow's waddy, that had actually taken part in tribal warfare, she wrote, and a cowrieshell necklet for Tottie.

About the same time came a long letter for Mr. Davenant, and enclosed in it was a bank draft for over one hundred pounds, which was to repay him for the sum

she had borrowed and the interest on it. Stephen read the letter through to the end, and handing it to his wife:

"A clever woman!" he said, "a deuced clever woman. I always said so!" and he plumed himself on his clear sightedness.

The letter, which purported to lay bare her previous life, made them acquainted with much they could never have guessed at, and explained many things that had puzzled them about her. They had all felt that some mystery surrounded the quiet, self-contained young governess, but this letter was a revelation. She told them of the circumstances in which her childhood had been spent, of her father's wealth, the luxurious suburban home in which she had passed her early years, surrounded by everything money could supply. An only child, petted and spoilt by her indulgent parents, she had only to express a wish to have it gratified. Troops of friends, girls of wealth and position like herself, made her life one long round of pleasure. So the years passed unheeded in their course during the eighties of last century. Prosperity was rampant, fortunes were to be made by the holding up of a finger. Rich men became richer, poor men became rich. The whole population was bitten by the mania for gambling in land.

Land in the city brought fabulous prices, land in the suburbs nearly as much. The "boom" swept over the whole of the States, every man in the most distant part was drawn in. Insignificant country townships sold land by the foot! Miss Homfrey's father, millionaire already, sought to become still more wealthy. His name was good to get on a list of directors for land syndicates. He was sought after and flattered, and cajoled into joining any promising speculation brought under his notice, and he was caught in the maelstrom. He was in syndicates that paid fancy prices for ungetatable blocks of land on the outskirts of nowhere, which they hoped to cut up later and sell at a hundred per cent. profit—or more. He helped to create banks and other mushroom financial institutions that published glowing prospectuses and issued faked balance-sheets, gulling the public by offers of high interest

on money entrusted to them. Prices soared. Sham prosperity spread a veil over the eyes of the people. The leaders in this dance of fools jangled their bells, and the masses followed like sheep. Then came the crash. The "boom" burst. The tide of fortune receded more quickly than it had flowed. The smart ones got out in time. The more simple ones were left to bear the burden or sink beneath the weight.

Miss Homfrey's father could not face the poverty he had brought upon his wife and daughter. He took his own life. Stunned by the blow, his widow lay between life and death for some time, and it devolved on the daughter to find ways and means to enable both to keep body and soul together. She found it difficult for, highly cultured and accomplished though she was, her education had taught her nothing that could be turned to account in providing for a living.

During these early years of the nineties there were thousands of girls in the same position as herself. Had their parents trained them as typists, bookkeepers, or in shorthand, instead of music and the other arts, they would have found the path easier. She found her only outlet was a position behind the counter in a big drapery shop. The pay then was not great, but it was something, and she was grateful for it. After her mother's death she left the shop for the stage. She had nobody but herself to consider. Old friends of the family in their palmy days had either dropped them or were in as great difficulties themselves. Banks, to which they had entrusted the savings of years, broke one after another, for it was not only the mushroom institutions of the land boom that burst like children's soap bubbles; old established financial houses closed their doors, drawn down into the general vortex, till men came to open their morning papers with dread, not knowing whether their sole means of livelihood might not have been snatched away during the night.

Miss Homfrey obtained an engagement at Rickards'—the Opera House as it was named then—to do a "song and dance" turn. It enabled her to earn sufficient to live on,

and she liked the life behind the footlights. She sang well and was an accomplished dancer, and became popular with her audience.

Then she met Bob Griggs, another victim of the land boom. They became engaged to be married, and it was at his request she gave up her theatrical life. He was resolved to seek his fortune in another State, and would be far removed from her and happier, if he could know she was sheltered and safe. She sought and obtained a position as governess in a private family, but it was not a success. Her employer's wife became jealous, and she was dismissed at short notice.

Of her second venture she need not tell. She found at Bunglatta nothing but kindness and consideration. It was a period of her life to which she would always look back with the pleasantest remembrances. Some of her doings there, she must confess, were a "pose," the worship of Adam Lindsay Gordon, for example. She regretted to say she had never heard of his poems—or only casually—until she had arrived in that district, where he had been known and loved. She discovered she would have been regarded as outside the pale had she acknowledged her ignorance, so, to familiarise herself with the poet's works she set them as tasks for her pupils, till both she and they knew them backwards.

"Poor little kiddies, how they loathed his name," she wrote, but, nevertheless, they would always be able to hold their own among the poet's worshippers.

While she was at Bunglatta Bob Griggs and a band of prospectors were seeking their fortune in Queensland. Luck eluded their efforts, till one of the partners struck what looked like a promising find. Each of the band was bound to lay down an equal sum to come in and acquire a share. Three hundred pounds had been the sum agreed on, and of this amount it had been left for Miss Homfrey to find two-thirds to enable her fiancè to acquire his share, Bob finding the rest. One hundred was in the bank, and represented what she had been able to save from her salary. The third hundred was the amount which Mr.

Davenant had so kindly advanced to her as a loan, and which she was now returning, together with interest, enclosed in this letter, and for which she begged to tender him her most grateful thanks. The mine, he might be interested to hear, was fulfilling all their expectations—the shares now being worth thousands instead of hundreds—and there was every indication that they would rise still higher.

Trusting to meet them all again at some future time, she remained, etc.

And she signed herself Louisa Griggs.

"A clever woman, my dear," Stephen repeated, as Kitty handed it back to him. "Don't you agree with me?"

"Too clever for you," Kitty told him.

It was the first she had heard of the hundred pounds loan. Her husband felt somewhat abashed as he replaced the letter in its envelope. He feared he was in for a bad quarter of an hour.

"Have you many more such sums invested in the same way?" she enquired, pointedly.

"Kitty!"

"Well, Miss Homfrey—or Mrs. Griggs as she calls herself now—isn't the only clever woman in the world, I suppose."

"My dear Kitty ——"

"And you're as soft as putty in their hands, seemingly," she went on.

"I assure you I have never had any transaction of the sort before the one with Miss Homfrey."

"Nor since, either?" she asked, suspiciously.

"Nor since."

"She took good care I shouldn't know of it," Kitty told him.

"On the contrary, she suggested my telling you," Stephen said, in a conciliatory tone.

"Then why didn't you tell me at the time?" she demanded.

"Because ——" he hesitated, but could find no better answer than the truth, "because, my love, I was afraid you'd wish her to leave."

"I certainly should. I'd not have had a woman of that sort under my roof a day longer than I was obliged."

"Well, I thought as she seemed to get on so well with the children and—and everything, it would be a pity to lose her. You missed her yourself when she went, you know you did, my dear."

"I never dreamt that she was that kind of woman," Kitty maintained, stoutly, "or I'd have sent her about her business quick and lively, I can tell you."

"At least she did no harm staying on here," her husband ventured to remind her.

"How can we tell what harm a woman of that sort does? When we trust our children to a person like Miss Homfrey to train, we cannot tell what seeds of evil may be sown."

"Nonsense, my dear Kitty! You're talking through your neck!" and his wife knew by his speech she was going a little too far. But she was a woman, and her feelings as a wife were hurt that another woman had not only deceived her, or rather kept her in the dark, but, what was a greater wrong, had drawn her husband into the plot.

It rankled in her mind long after the day Stephen showed her Miss Homfrey's letter. It was not till a much later date when time had soothed her ruffled feelings, that reading in a Brisbane paper of Robert Griggs, the mining magnate, and his beautiful wife, figuring at society functions, she could bring herself to take a calmer view of the affair.

Later still, when Mr. and Mrs. Griggs, during a pleasure trip to Victoria, took a motor tour through the Western District. Kitty was able to receive them both at Bunglatta, on which occasion she acted the part of hostess in her most gracious manner.

CHAPTER XXX.

A Time of Waiting.

After the magistrate had granted bail, which, as Stephen had told Joan was obtained without difficulty, Wilfred would have returned to the country, but his brother prevented it. Stephen also vetoed the announcement of their engagement.

"Wait," he counselled, "wait until we know how things will be. It's not fair to the girl," he told his brother. "And if—by any ill chance—the worse should happen—not that I think it will—she would be released from her promise to you."

Wilfred knew his brother was right, and that he could not hold Joan to her promise, until he could go to her freely with a name clear of all stain.

So he passed his spare time—and he had many spare hours—in roaming the streets of the city and suburbs, and visiting the beaches and public parks. Theatres had small attraction for him, he preferred the open air. A favorite haunt with him was the Fitzroy Gardens, he often took a book or paper to occupy his thoughts there. He knew them of old, also the Treasury Gardens, whose familiar benches spoke to him of nights spent in the open, when he used to doss there with other men equally penniless and out of a job.

He knew the labor agencies in Queen and Bourke Streets from the inside, and recalled, as he passed them now, how often he also had formed one of a group of applicants for work round their doors.

One day outside a Queen Street registry office he recognised a familiar face.

"Good-day, Fleming!" he called.

The man looked at him as at a stranger. "Good-day, Mister!"

"You don't remember me?" Wilfred said.

"Can't say as I minds 'avin' seen you afore, Mister," the man answered, "Wen wuz I workin' for you?"

"You never worked for me—you worked with me," Wilfred told him.

The man looked still more mystified and "reckoned the bloomin' torf was balmy."

"Don't you recollect working up at B———?" the other reminded him.

"Them reclamation works? Corse I does, but can't say as I remembers seein' you there."

"I worked in your gang," Wilfred told him.

"Garn! Mister," the man laughed derisively. Turning to his mates, "'E looks like as 'e done work of that sort, don't 'e?"

"Yes, and I was fired for knocking down the shift boss," Wilfred told him.

"You! It were Bill the blacksmith knocked 'im down, a blanky slave-drivin' bully, an' we wuz all bleedin' ter do it all along, only none of us 'ad the nerve ter tackle 'im till 'e gets Bill the blacksmith fair riled, an' 'e ups an' lets 'im 'ave it in the jaw."

"They called me Bill the blacksmith up there," Wilfred informed him.

"You! you're Bill? Well, strike me pink, Mister, I'd not believed yer could do the bloomin' swell biz'ness like you wuz born to it. Give us yer 'and, Mister, I'm proud ter meet you agen," and he held out a dirty paw, which Wilfred grasped with a grip that left no doubt in Fleming's mind that it was the same strong hand that had downed the other man.

"Wot cher doin' now, Mister? Made yer pile?" Fleming asked.

"I'm station-managing in the Western District. Want a job?"

"Up the country? Not much—me fer the city. Melbun's good enough fer me."

"You make a big mistake hanging round town looking for work," the other told him. "There's room for hundreds more in the country, instead of crowding each other out in town."

He knew he might talk till doomsday, nothing would persuade these men to tear themselves away from the city. It had seized them body and soul, and the poorest job there had attractions for such men that nothing in the out-lying parts could compete against.

The talk with Fleming had roused memories of past days. Wilfred wondered whether a certain school of boxing still existed, where he had studied the noble art of self-defence. He strolled round to gaze on it again. He had gloried in his skill, acquired from a professional at the game. In many a workers' camp, both in his own State and in the West, he had exhibited his ability to "lay out" an opponent. How proud he had been, what a hero his mates considered him! It gave him the position of a little king among such men. And now, see to what it had brought him. He had been too ready with his fist that last time, and it was this gift of which he had been so proud that was his undoing in the end. Verily, he thought, the proud shall be brought low.

All his hours were not spent in idleness, however.

On Stephen's advice he had placed himself unreservedly in the hands of his brother's solicitors, Messrs. Floyd and Floyd, of Chancery Lane; the junior partner, Mr. Septimus Floyd, was working up the case for his defence, and Wilfred held himself at the disposal of this gentleman, to furnish him with any information that might assist his cause. From the quiet hotel at which he was staying, to the lawyer's office, was not far, and receiving a telephone call one morning to be at the office in an hour, he set off for the Little Collins Street building, where the firm of Messrs. Floyd and Floyd did its business.

Wilfred had heard from Joan that morning, and though the girl had tried not to let him feel her anxiety on his behalf, he guessed she was suffering. But her sweet messages of love and trust were dear to the man. She told

him of the doings at Windfells and of Stephen's having lent a trustworthy man of his own as overseer, a man who had taken Wilfred's place at Bunglatta. It cheered him, as the girl knew it must, to think all was going well while he was away.

It was, therefore, a fairly happy young man who presented himself at the lawyers. On giving his name to a clerk he was conducted to the inner sanctum of Mr. Septimus Floyd, wondering vaguely for what the junior partner might want him, and what his feelings would be when he walked out of that door again.

"Sit down, Mr. Davenant," Mr. Floyd said, as he greeted his client. He had never met Wilfred before he took up the case, though being Stephen's advisers, Messrs. Floyd and Floyd knew of the younger brother, the black sheep of the family, by reputation.

"What he had seen of the young man he found difficult to reconcile with what he had heard.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions, Mr. Davenant —personal questions—and before doing so I want you to understand a very important truth. It is this: There are two people whom it is fatal for a person to attempt to deceive."

"Only two?" put in Wilfred.

"Your doctor and—your lawyer," Floyd said.

"I should have thought a man's wife ——" began the other.

"Comes under a different category. That's a matter of policy. I refer to a question of principle," asserted the lawyer. "For your own sake, therefore, I must request full and complete answers to my questions."

"I'll try and give you all the information I can," Wilfred promised, feeling that he was about to be subjected to an ignominious exposure of his past life, which, in other words, meant a stirring up of muddy waters.

Taking some papers from his desk, Mr. Floyd looked out one and, drawing a blank sheet before him, proceeded to catechise his victim.

"Now about those fires, supposed to be the work of one or more incendiaries. What do you know about them?"

"I was blamed for them," admitted Wilfred, "but ——"

"I didn't ask if you caused them. Did you have reason to suspect anyone?" Mr. Floyd asked.

"Not at the time," the young man told him.

"Were you present? There was the wool shed at Yarrapine station burnt in 189—. Were you there at the time?"

"Yes."

"And the one at Mulwater the following year. Were you there?"

"Yes." Wilfred realised how damaging these admissions must appear.

"And there was a third at Butler's Corner the year previous to the one at Yarrapine. Were you there?"

"No," answered Wilfred.

"Where were you at that date?"

"Working for an old chap in the Otways."

"I suppose we can prove that?"

"I suppose so." Wilfred seemed doubtful.

"You have his address?"

The young man hesitated.

"I want an answer, please, Mr. Davenant," the lawyer said, his pencil poised to write.

"He's in Pentridge, serving a sentence."

"I'm afraid I can't congratulate you on your choice of friends, young man," Mr. Floyd told him, grimly. "However ——. What was his occupation when you worked for him?"

"He was running a whisky still in the forest."

"And you aided him?" the lawyer asked.

"He engaged me to look after the farm for him," Wilfred explained.

"Hum! A blind, I suppose."

"Yes," he was obliged to confess.

"Have you ever been convicted, Mr. Davenant?" the lawyer asked, making a note on the paper in front of him.

"No, never!" and Mr. Floyd noted the face opposite to him flush painfully.

"Sure? I want the truth, please," he said.

"Quite sure."

"But you have been charged, I understand?"

"Yes, three times," Wilfred admitted.

"And the particulars?" he demanded. "Place and nature of charge."

"Once in West Australia for conspiracy to foment industrial trouble."

Mr. Floyd jotted down the answers as the other spoke, "And the other two?" he asked.

"In Victoria. Once for incendiarism, and the time Kernahan was caught—he's the man serving his sentence now."

"And you managed to get off?"

"Yes, the old fellow swore I was only a farm hand and knew nothing of the other business."

"And you say we may rely on him if—if required—being still willing to speak in your favor?"

"I think so. He was always straight enough—in other ways," he finished, as he caught the twisted smile on the face of the lawyer.

"And the other two charges—the one in the West and this incendiarism?"

"The case for conspiracy was quashed, owing to a technicality. In the other case there was not sufficient evidence for a conviction, they said."

"You pleaded 'not guilty,' of course," and Mr. Floyd's keen glance as he put the question seemed to read the other man's inmost thoughts.

"I wasn't guilty of it," he asserted hotly. "I may have talked a lot of hot air ——"

"Incited others ——" suggested the lawyer.

"But never in my life have I been guilty of destruction of that kind."

"Quite so. Then we may go on looking for someone else as the agent of all these fires. So far we have got evidence that you were present at two, while this man Hansen was present at three at least. We are following up his antecedents. His father, it appears, met his death before the son was born, and the cause of death was a fire at a large factory where he worked. The mother lost her reason, never very strong, and had to be put under restraint for a time. She appears to have reared the son to take revenge on the public for the loss of his father by setting fire to property wherever he could do so safely—that is, without being suspected. Probably it became a mania with the son, just as it was with his mother. With the cunning of a madman he worked from behind the shelter of other men, choosing you latterly, as he found you a convenient stalking-horse, Mr. Davenant. You appear—pardon my saying it—to have allowed your tongue to run too freely. You talked to these men about setting fire to the rich man's acres till you got the credit of these disastrous losses of property. I'm glad to believe that you have had no direct hand in them."

"Nor had I as great indirect responsibility as you credit me with, sir," Wilfred told him. "I admit I let Hansen lead others to believe I had a hand in them, simply because I never troubled to contradict him."

"Thought you acquired a kind of glory from being the hero of such exploits, I suppose?" Mr. Floyd put in.

"I'm afraid I was weak enough to think so," he agreed.

"Ah! Well, you're not the first young man who has suffered from swelled head—and you won't be the last," the lawyer added.

Gathering the papers containing his notes into a neat bundle, Mr. Floyd swung round in his office chair and,

crossing his legs, gave a quizzical glance at the young man seated before him.

Wilfred looked dejected. He felt like a sucked orange, he told Stephen afterwards—nothing but the rind left when the lawyer had finished with him.

"There's one thing I'd like to understand," Mr. Floyd said, "It has no bearing—no direct bearing on the case in hand, so you need not tell me if you'd rather not—but, what on earth possessed a young fellow like you to throw up all his chances in life and go in for the hand to mouth existence you have been leading?"

"It was my father's leaving Stephen twice as much as he left me began it," Wilfred told him. "He was right, of course, he knew I wasn't fit to have control of much money. Before his death he paid up more than once to get me out of a hole I'd got into. He had no wish to let the wealth he had earned and saved by his own thrift be dissipated by his son."

"And what was your favorite form of extravagance, if I may ask?"

"I went in for racing."

The lawyer nodded, "Too common, unfortunately," he commented.

"Yes, but I wasn't satisfied to be an onlooker or punter only. I kept horses of my own," Wilfred informed him.

"I see—rode to the devil all the quicker on your own steed, so to speak."

"I felt very bitter about it when I heard how my father had willed his property and cut myself off from my own people to join in a short and merry life with the friends I had made in town—spendthrifts, like myself. They stuck to me as long as I could go the pace, then dropped me like an old glove. I wrote to Steve—to my brother—time and again, till he got tired of helping me; so did my sister, or rather Steve wouldn't let her go on chucking away her money on me. He had it all tied up with his own in the station, so she couldn't get at it."

The lawyer nodded approvingly. "Very sensible thing for Mr. Davenant to do," he said.

"Yes—I appreciate that now, but at the time I could have prayed they might both be brought down to my level. I did many a thing with the thought of shaming the other members of my family. I hoped they'd hear of me. While I was in the West I still went by my own name. When I was on trial for the conspiracy charge I posted Stephen the papers with my name figuring among the accused. I even went so far as to make a man promise to send him a paper with the sentence if we had been convicted. I wanted to hurt their pride—his and his wife's. You see, Mr. Floyd, what a rotter you've got for a client.

The lawyer looked at him steadily a moment before answering. He found it hard to believe that the man before him had passed through the experiences to which Wilfred Davenant confessed.

"And how, may I ask, did you—er—how shall I put it? —find yourself again, Mr. Davenant?"

For answer Wilfred drew from his pocket Joan Fetherston's photograph.

"She found me, or rather the sight of her brought me up standing. She saved me from falling lower. She raised me to what I am—not very much yet, perhaps, but ——" he finished deprecatingly.

"This is Miss Fetherston's likeness, I presume," Mr. Floyd said, studying the smiling, piquant features of the photograph Wilfred handed to him. "The young lady whose life you saved at the risk of your own."

"How—who told you?" began Wilfred, for he knew he had not spoken to anyone of the incident, certainly not to Mr. Floyd.

"I happen to have heard about it," the lawyer told him, then, with a change from his professional manner. "Doing anything to-night? No? Then will you come out and dine with us? I'd like to introduce you to my wife."

Wilfred looked the surprise he felt. "You turn me inside out until I feel like any number of super-embossed.

double-distilled brands of a mongrel," he said, "and then tell me you'd like me to meet your wife!"

"Well, why not? I rang her up before you came and said she'd probably have a visitor to dinner."

"And does she know—have you told her about me?" the young man asked, doubtfully.

Mr. Septimus Floyd broke into a hearty laugh. "She knows all I intend her to know," he said then.

"You, see I guessed, when I'd done with you this morning, you'd maybe need a pick-me-up of some sort to restore you to the perch I'd knocked you off. My wife's the best little woman I know to furnish it, you'll feel a different being after an evening with her. She could bring a smile to a weeping willow. Her grandmother was an Irishwoman."

"I'd accept thankfully only ——"

"Well?"

"I haven't a dinner-suit," Wilfred acknowledged.

"You won't need it; there'll be only ourselves."

"Then I'll come, with pleasure."

"Good, we dine at seven," and he gave him the address.

CHAPTER XXXI.

An Evening of Enchantment.

Wilfred found Mrs. Septimus Floyd all that her husband had promised when, at seven o'clock sharp, he was ushered into the hall of the lawyer's home in Malvern that evening.

Mr. Floyd was not correct in saying there would be no other guest. There was a tall, thin young man, clean-shaved, and prematurely bald, who talked and tried to interest him in "Jonathans," "Cleopatras," "Cox's Orange Pippins," and other names, which conveyed little to Wilfred's mind. He gathered that the young man was interested in fruitgrowing, and had an orchard out Doncaster way. Incidentally, he was the council briefed for the defence, but Mr. Floyd did not tell his client that.

After awhile the stranger left him to be entertained by Mrs. Floyd, while he and his host discoursed apart.

As Mrs. Septimus began by telling Wilfred she had been a school-fellow of Nell's, they soon found mutually interesting topics on which to converse. When Barbara Floyd saw the light that danced in the man's eyes upon her first mention of Joan Fetherston, she devoted herself with her native tact to provide him with the most heavenly time possible. She dug out from her memory every school experience in which Joan had taken part. She served them up to the hungry lover freshly garnished and retrimmed, and if she occasionally drew on her imagination for details that never had any existence in reality, she may be forgiven for the kindly heart that prompted her and the added happiness it bestowed on her enraptured audience, for had not her husband confessed that her grandmother was an Irishwoman?

So absorbed did the young man become in listening to tales of his lady love's girlhood, that when a chance reference was made to the lateness of the hour he jumped up

with profuse apologies. He had not known an evening could pass so quickly.

She laughed brightly, calling him flatterer, and asked when he had kissed the Blarney Stone, while her husband observed with satisfaction the effect of his prescription.

"Good-night! Hope to have the pleasure of showing you my orchard some day, Mr. Davenant," the stranger said, as Wilfred departed. Then, turning to his host:—"A thousand pities, Sep., old man. A thousand pities! Why in the name of heaven are men such fools?"

"I fancy we're all more or less fools in some way, only we don't all go in for the same brand," Mr. Floyd told him.

"A young fellow like that to go and mess up his life in this way."

"I don't think you'll have any work after all. There'll be no case for a jury."

"No! Well, I'm sorry, in a way. I'd rather fancy pulling a chap like that out of a hole," the young man said. Then he laughed. "Say, Sep.! How'd it be if they had women jurymen in a case like this? What price the prosecutor? Why, they'd be tumbling over each other to bring in a 'not guilty,' eh? See him marching out of court to the strains of 'See the Conquering Hero,' can't you?"

"You old sinner, you! Wanting to pollute the stream that flows from the fount of Justice. Why, you'll be advocating embracery next!" and, with a resounding thump between the shoulders, and a jovial laugh, Septimus Floyd sent him flying out into the darkness.

As he closed the door a sound like the echo of an impolite adjective floated back from the lips of the legal luminary.

That dinner at the Floyds and his kindly reception by Barbara did more for the restoration of Wilfred's self-respect than anything else could have effected. It came as a sedative to jarred nerves.

That the lawyer should have wished him to know his wife, that he was willing to receive him into his home, made the young man once more take heart.

He regarded Mr. Floyd from this day as a friend, as well as an adviser. So that, when he received another message later, requesting his presence at the office, he looked forward to the meeting without any of his former dread.

"I have some good news for you," the lawyer said, as he was shown in. "We've found Perry."

"Perry!" Wilfred echoed, dubiously. "What good—I mean, can he help us? Will he be on our side?"

"Certainly. He will swear that you risked your life by entering the burning building to rescue Miss Fetherston, also that you knew she was to sleep in it that night—as they all did—fairly convincing proof that you had no hand in its destruction. Oh, yes! Perry was quite ready to help us as soon as we promised him we'd let him keep the reward."

"How did you get hold of him?" asked Wilfred.

"Miss Fetherston sent us his address, and begged us to try and get hold of him. We were on his track before I last saw you, but it was only a day or two ago we found him. He's been travelling round the country. He was a bit shy at first, thought we were going to prosecute him for obtaining money on false pretences, I suppose. However, he's ready if he's wanted. Then he knows all about that madman Hansen having his knife into you over some business up there. However, I don't think we shall require to call any witnesses for your defence, Mr. Davenant."

Wilfred looked at the other man. "You think, then ——" He was afraid to hope too soon.

"I doubt if there will be a case at all. The prosecution hasn't a leg to stand on. I was just a little afraid at one time something might crop up in your past life that the law could seize on, but ——" he touched a packet of papers he had taken from a drawer, "there's nothing in all these to be afraid of."

The young man saw they were the notes of his answers last time. "I have to congratulate you, young man. Luck has been your friend all through, and not the least lucky thing is your engagement to a girl like Miss Fetherston. I congratulate you again."

"It's not an engagement—yet," Wilfred told him. "Stephen—my brother—refused to allow it till—till we know how things will go."

Mr. Floyd seemed amused.

"From the photograph you showed me, young man, I should say the young lady is not a person who would submit to dictation from her future brother-in-law," he said.

Wilfred quitted the office that day with a feeling that he walked on air. No case! No prosecution! That was what Mr. Floyd had told him. It seemed too much to hope for.

When the day came, and the case was called on, Mr. Floyd's words proved correct. The police had no evidence for the Crown to submit, and it was struck out.

With the lawyer's congratulations ringing in his ears, Wilfred accompanied Stephen back to the hotel where Kitty and Joan awaited them.

"At last, sweetheart!" he exclaimed, when the two found themselves alone.

"No more clouds to come between us, dearest," she told him, as her eyes rested lovingly on his face. "You are thinner—you have suffered!" she spoke in pity for his worn looks.

"I had an anxious time—I couldn't have kept up my courage, but for the thought of you, Joan; I knew, whatever happened, you would not fail me."

She nestled closer within his arms. "Dearest, I would have waited, no matter how long the time might have been," she told him; and, knowing it was true, a great thankfulness filled him.

. . . . . .

They were married quietly in town, only Stephen and Kitty being present. Both Joan and Wilfred set their faces against publicity of any sort after all they had gone through, and the ceremony was of the simplest.

"I think they are going to be very happy," Stephen said, as he and Kitty returned from seeing them off for their honeymoon in the mountains.

"I hope so, I'm sure," she answered. "It's a bigger bit of luck than Wilfred deserved though, after the way he has behaved," she maintained.

"Do you know what he told me the night he arrived at Bunglatta, Kitty? He said—we were talking about you and what a good woman you are—he said if he'd had the luck to find a good woman he'd have been a better man."

"Maybe," Kitty replied, "but I don't know. Those things are in the blood. I'm quite sure, Steve, even if you'd not had me to look after you, you'd never have gone the pace like Wilfred."

And Kitty regarded her husband with a critical eye. She could not picture the sedate Stephen indulging in the wandering life of the ne'er-do-well Wilfred. Still less could she fancy him climbing back to his present position if Fate had played such a scurvy trick as to kick him down into the underworld that most people only know through the medium of the newspapers. Yet Wilfred had been there, and had returned to his people little the worse, seemingly. At least, Joan was content with him, and the girl might have chosen almost any of the young men of the district, had she wished.

Of course, Wilfred was good looking—much better looking than Stephen. Kitty quite admitted that. In fact, some people might call him handsome, and he certainly looked very well indeed when he stood beside Joan in church this morning, though Kitty had noticed his hand shook so much she was really afraid that he'd drop the ring. Thank goodness, Stephen had not been nervous the day he was married. She, Kitty, felt far more nervous; not a bit like Joan Fetherston, who had been as calm and

self-controlled as possible—not a bit like a bride, Kitty considered.

. . . . . .

Of course, people had a deal to say about it all, and it was more than a nine days' wonder as a topic of conversation in the district and elsewhere. Society papers in town found it a choice subject for gossipy paragraphs. The romantic side was paraded for all it was worth. Joan's wealth and beauty were made the peg on which to hang attractive notices; her photograph was petitioned for to appear in the columns of the illustrated papers. Friends made at school, but since lost sight of, wrote to send congratulations and inquire if the heroine of the romantic marriage were identical with the Joan Fetherston whom they remembered.

Neither Joan nor her husband were much troubled at the publicity of which they were the victims. It was unavoidable; human nature is not to be denied the food that keeps alive its natural inquisitiveness. When a person's life becomes monotonous it would be but cruelty to refuse him—or her—the pleasure to be derived from prying into a neighbor's affairs. The thankfulness both felt at the ending of their troubles, more than compensated for any such worries.

One of Joan's great pleasures was the renewal of acquaintance with her school-fellow Barbara Floyd, and Mr. and Mrs. Septimus Floyd became welcome guests at Windfells, when the lawyer could indulge in a holiday visit to the country.

A wedding present, that did not reach them till later, came from Queensland. It was accompanied by good wishes from Mr. and Mrs. Griggs, and took the form of a necklet of Queensland tourmalines and a gold pencil-case set with pink coral.

"I wonder if she knew?" Joan said, her memory going back to the Portland visit.

"I sometimes think she knew—or guessed—a good deal more than we suspected. She was rather a smart girl," Wilfred remarked.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Tom Rawlins Letter.

Three years had elapsed since the close of our last chapter—years that brought happiness to the lives of Wilfred and Joan. They were still ready to romp and play with Teddy and Tottie when they paid them holiday visits, but Wilfred had a little Teddy of his own now, only he was christened "Wilfred," and they call him "Freddy." Tottie adored the baby, which was much more interesting than a doll, she declared, and little Freddy was equally ready to be adored by both the children.

The one thing that Joan found not all that she could wish—her crumpled rose-leaf—was the tone of Tom Rawlins' letters lately. For some months after going to Queensland he wrote cheerfully, hoping to make a good thing of it. McIntosh had been better than his word, and Tom found himself a partner on equal terms with his friend. The seasons had been a bit dry, but the drought could not last much longer. Already there had been four years of it, and the rains must come soon—everybody said so. Joan sent the letters on to Nell, who locked them all away in her desk.

She knew, also, that the rains must come soon, for had not Tom said so, but she wondered if it would be very wicked to go down on her knees and pray that the rains might not come. She thought of the man up there in the dry North, battling against the forces of Nature, and she sighed for the pity of it.

"I'm afraid poor Tom Rawlins will go under," Wilfred told his brother, and Nell heard him and kept silence.

"Is he so hard hit?" Stephen asked.

"He and McIntosh have lost nearly the whole of their stock," Wilfred told him

"Dear me! that's bad—a good thing McIntosh has money behind him," the other observed.

The rains did not come, in spite of all the predictions, and things went from bad to worse, while Rawlins wrote less often, for there was nothing pleasant of which to write.

Then came a letter telling of final disaster. The bank fore-closed; McIntosh got out by arranging a private compromise on his own account, leaving his partner to bear the burden. Every penny he had put in—all his savings—were swept away; and worse still, he could not meet his liabilities. He wrote to tell Joan, knowing she would sympathise with him in his failure, for she had always been a friend to him. It was the letter of a man heart-broken by the bludgeonings of adverse destiny.

"Her eyes filled with tears of pity for the man, as she read the sad narrative, only one of many such, alas, in those years, when one after another large station owners went down like the men in a giant's game of nine-pins. Joan showed the letter to her husband.

"I don't think I'll send it to Nell," she said. "It will only make her sad to know of his failure."

Wilfred read the pathetic story, and handing it back to her, said, "I think I'd let her see it all the same." Then, his thoughts carrying him back, "Poor old Tom!" he reflected, "it's hard luck!" and he remembered how he used to envy him his luck at one time. He could scarcely realise it now, but there had actually been a time when he was a bit jealous of Rawlins. How long ago, it seemed, and yet it was only a little more than four years since he first saw Tom and Joan standing there together. Then Wilfred was the outcast and Tom Rawlins the privileged being who worked for Joan and saw her every day; and now—"Poor Tom!" he repeated.

The letter was sent on to Bunglatta, and Nell, on opening it, saw the writing she had been hoping and waiting for. She carried it away where no one should chance to see her while she read, for the girl did not choose that others should inquire the reason of her laughing. Nell had no tears to let fall on the letter which delivered Tom Rawlins bound and helpless into her little hands. He was

leaving for Brisbane, he said, as soon as he had arranged for the bank to take over the property. He had to see the manager at the head office and find out how his affairs stood. He knew he would be saddled with a huge liability, to be a drain on his future, until, with the Court of Insolvency's gracious permission, he could cry quits once more.

He was leaving—that was what touched her most closely at present. His future address she did not know, perhaps if he were once lost to her ken in the crowds of the capital city, it would not be an easy matter to trace him—one unit among thousands of equally small account.

There was no time to be lost, she saw, if she wished her friendly hand to reach him. She took a long time over the letter she wrote, though it was not so long, but it was the difficulty she found in expressing herself. Had she followed her first impulse the note would have been easy, but then, could she ever hold up her head again if she were to offer him her love unsought?

She was at length satisfied with her letter, and sent it on its way.

It found Tom just about to take a sad farewell of the home that had passed from him. A day later and he would have left for Brisbane without knowing the comfort and consolation a few sincere words from a distant friend can bring.

He not only read the short note with its generous offer of the half of her own fortune as a free loan, till he could clear himself and start again, but he read between the lines. He had classed himself as "down and out," and lo! the gods were showering the gifts of love and fortune upon him.

Miss Davenant begged him to give her this small pleasure and to regard it as a friendly act. "For we are old friends, and what are friends for but to help one another?" she wrote. She had told Stephen that she would be withdrawing a portion of her capital from Bunglatta, and he was quite agreeable. She did not need all her money for

herself, and if Tom would do her this favor and accept her offer in the spirit she made it, he would make her very happy.

Tom Rawlins, as soon as he found time to send a reply, accepted.

"On one condition," he wrote, "and that is, that you also make me a gift of the generous lender."

Joan sat sewing on the verandah, while little Freddy crawled round her feet, gathering grime from the dusty boards on his clean white muslin frock. Nurse would be angry, Joan knew, but baby did so love to get about on his little hands and knees, and cried when she took him from his game.

There was a beat of hoofs along the road, and next minute, with a "Whoop!" two young figures on horseback cleared the garden fence and drew up before her on the path.

Both together they shouted the news, each eager to be the first in announcing it.

"Auntie Nell's going to marry Mr. Rawlins, ain't it fun!" and they were off their ponies and up the steps to Joan before she had grasped the gist of their tidings.

Were they sure? She was glad—had Nell written? And where was the letter?

"No, she hadn't time to write. We came right away as soon as we knew," Teddy told her.

He was at Bunglatta for the Easter holidays, and he and Tottie were equally ready for any fun that offered. Consequently, when they learnt Nell's great news, they came at once to inform the Windfells people.

"Hello, scalliwag!" and Teddy picked up the baby. "You're going to have a new uncle, old chap, ain't it fun? Hurroo!" and Freddy held out two chubby arms and tried to say "Hurroo!" too.

"See me play ball with him, Aunt Joan," and he tossed the child nearly to the roof and caught it again, while Freddy shrieked with delight.

"Teddy! For heaven's sake don't kill my baby!" Joan begged in fear and trembling, for the verandah roof was low, and she had not much faith in Teddy's abilities as nurse maid.

"Call this apology for a human being a baby!" scoffed the boy. "Don't he like it, though? Look at 'im asking for more—upsy goes," and again the delighted infant ascended to the roof.

But Nemesis, in the shape of Uncle Wilfred, was upon him and, as Joan rescued her baby, Teddy felt his ear tweaked.

"Please remember, young man, I don't allow my son and heir to be used as a football."

"Uncle Wilfred, isn't it jolly? Auntie Nell's engaged to Mr. Rawlins," cried Tottie, climbing on his shoulders, while Teddy, released, slipped out of reach.

"Yes, the children say they came on purpose to tell us," Joan said, as Wilfred turned to her for confirmation. "It's the best news I've heard for many a day," and she laughed happily, rejoicing that her wish was to be gratified at last.

"The most important event that has taken place since our own wedding," he suggested.

"Wilfred!" Joan was indignant.

"What is it, dear?"

"You've forgotten baby! He's much more important than even Nell and Tom, *I* consider."

He stooped and kissed the golden head, and made his peace.

"Of course he is, sweetheart," he agreed.

The horses, growing impatient, pawed the smoothly gravelled path.

"Take them round to the stable, Teddy, like a good boy," urged Joan. "They'll spoil the path. You'll stay to-night?" she asked, hospitably.

"Can't," the boy answered curtly, but did not move till she again insisted on the ponies being removed.

"Paths your grandmother! What a' they for, anyway?"

"To walk on," she told him, "and I don't think going to school improves you, Teddy. You used to be such a polite little boy."

"He's going to be so now, and take the ponies away," Uncle Wilfred put in. "How do you like school, Teddy?"

"Bonza!" exclaimed the boy, as he led the animals away to the stable.

"We *are* going to stay to-night, Aunt Joan; Teddy said he meant to," Tottie told her, when her brother disappeared, and she begged to be allowed possession of the baby till nurse came to claim him for his afternoon sleep.

"Anything to eat in the garden?" Teddy demanded, on his return from the stable.

"You might find some passion-fruit on the trellis at the bottom of the garden," Joan told him.

"Good enough! Come on, Tot!" and the two scampered off, for they knew every foot of the Windfells garden, as well as they knew their own.

Arm in arm Wilfred and his wife watched them disappear.

"I used to envy Steve that boy once," he said, meditatively.

Then, slipping his arm round Joan, he led her the length of the verandah, till they stood where they could look over towards the men's quarters. Farther off still the shearing shed stood out prominently. A great peace lay on the

smiling landscape, broken only by the distant yapping of the hut dogs. Wilfred let his eyes rest on old Aesop grazing in the home paddock, and a swift rush of memories made him draw his wife closer, while a light-hearted laugh broke from his lips. Joan raised her eyes questioningly to his face.

"I was thinking, sweetheart," he said, "thinking of that day nearly four years ago, when you and Rawlins stood here like this."

"Not quite like this," she caught him up, as she inflicted a sharp pat on the hand that held her to him.

"Don't interrupt," he said, catching and imprisoning her fingers in his own. "When you and Tom Rawlins, I say, stood on this very spot waiting for three delegates sent by the other men to interview you. Do you remember who those three were?"

"I have a faint recollection of something of the sort happening," she answered. "One man was named Perry, wasn't he? And another was that poor mad Hansen, who is in the asylum now."

"And the third—the most disreputable looking of the lot. Do you remember him?" Wilfred demanded.

"No! I've no intention of remembering any such disreputable looking person," she answered, mischievously. Whereupon he drew her still closer, and raising his face to her own, announced:

"I'm going to kiss you for impertinence to your husband."

After a short silence, Joan gave a contented sigh.

"I'm so glad, dear," she said.

"Glad?" he echoed.

"About Nell," she answered.

THE END.

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